

Dehydration in the Final Days

Families often ask about giving fluids through an IV when a loved one stops drinking in their final days. For some families, giving fluids can feel spiritually or emotionally important. They might feel confused or upset because their loved one can't drink anymore.

Not drinking is a normal part of the dying process, but it can still be hard for family members to understand.

The values and beliefs of the family are important when deciding whether to give fluids in the last days. In some cases, giving fluids might do more harm than good.

Before offering fluids, ask these questions:

- What is the purpose of giving fluids? Does it match the patient's or family's goals?
- Will giving fluids cause pain or discomfort?
- Will giving fluids improve the patient's quality of life?

Common myths about fluids

- Myth: Not drinking enough fluids causes pain and discomfort at the end of life.
- Myth: Not giving fluids is the same as not providing care.

Fluid facts

- In hospice or palliative care, the goal is to support what the patient wants, including the choice to stop drinking fluids.
- It's normal for people to lose interest in eating and drinking as they near the end of life. As a person gets closer to death, they need less fluid and forcing them to drink can cause swelling or infection.
- As the body slows down, fluids can build up in the lungs, making it hard to breathe and causing discomfort.
- While patients may have a dry mouth, gently moistening the mouth can help them feel more comfortable.

Other helpful resources

Facing Hard Choices: A Guide to Artificial Nutrition and Hydration

Food and Fluid at End of Life

Final Days

Hard Choices for Loving People

Hospice Training for Caregivers and Families Video: Final Moments

Hospice Training for Caregivers and Families Video: Signs of Changes

When the Time Comes