

Food and Fluid at End of Life

Sign and symptoms of changing nutrition and hydration

As people get closer to the end of life, their hunger and thirst may decrease. This is a natural part of the body slowing down.

Nutrition means the food and calories we eat.

Hydration means the fluids (like water) we drink.

What can you do to help with nutrition and hydration at the end of life?

It's normal for a person to lose interest in food and drink as they become more ill. Treatment will depend on the person's wishes and their illness.

- Encourage your loved one to eat or drink their favorite foods and drinks, but don't force them.
- Help others understand that eating or drinking may make the person uncomfortable as their body no longer uses food and drink the same way.
- If the person can still swallow, offer small sips of drink every two hours.
- Clean the person's mouth with a soft, damp cloth to help improve taste.
- Support the person if they choose not to eat or drink.
- Encourage them to rest before and after meals.
- If dentures no longer fit, contact a dentist.
- Make mealtime a calm and pleasant experience.
- Offer small meals on easy-to-use dishes.

PATIENT AND FAMILY EDUCATION

- Try small portions of salty or dry foods and clear liquids if they feel nauseous.
- Show support with things like a gentle massage or spending time together, rather than just focusing on food.

What should you tell your care team?

Tell your care team if your loved one:

- No longer wants to eat or drink.
- Forgets to swallow.
- Coughs when eating or drinking.
- Has a dry mouth, tongue, or skin.
- Loses weight quickly, so their clothes or dentures no longer fit.
- Has less urine.
- Becomes confused or very sleepy.

Other helpful resources

Dehydration in the Final Days

Facing Hard Choices: A Guide to Artificial Nutrition and Hydration

Final Days

Hard Choices for Loving People

Hospice Training for Caregivers and Families Video: Signs of Changes

Hospice Training for Caregivers and Families Video: Final Moments

When the Time Comes

