

Eating & Drinking in the Last Weeks and Days of Life

Everybody is different, so when someone approaches the end of their life it is not possible to say exactly what will happen. It is common for the person who is dying to go through certain changes. The focus of care may change and tends to be centred on helping them to be as comfortable as possible.

Eating and drinking less

Often people lose weight and muscle and look thin or frail. This can be caused by their illness, treatment or loss of appetite. It is common for people to want to eat and drink less. Some people have difficulty swallowing, a sore or dry mouth or feel sick. As a person nears the end of their life in the last few days, the body's processes slow down. As they become frailer or sleepier their ability to swallow food or fluid can decrease. Some people don't want to eat and drink or are not able to, this is normal and shouldn't be forced. Their body cannot digest food as well or absorb nutrients from it. It can be helpful to reassure your family member or friend that this is a normal part of the dying process, so that they don't feel they have to force themselves to eat and that it is okay if they don't.

You can support your family member or friend to choose if and when they want to eat or drink. Don't worry about providing a balanced diet. The aim of eating and drinking during this time should be about comfort and quality of life. Even very small amounts of a person's favourite food or drink can provide comfort.

Some people don't want to eat or drink or aren't able to. This is normal and they shouldn't be forced. If you are worried about how much they are eating and drinking, speak to their doctor or nurse.

Mouth & lip care

Providing good mouth and lip care is important to ensure people feel as comfortable as possible. The person giving care should continue to explain to the dying person the plan to carry out mouth care. If the dying person closes their mouth shut, then this should be taken as an indication that it is not wanted at that time. Mouth care should stop and be offered again at another time. Some family members or friends may like to be involved in mouth care and you can be supported by caregivers to do this.

Tips:

- Keep lips moist with lip balm - avoid petroleum gel (e.g. Vaseline) if on oxygen therapy as this a fire hazard
- Use a small spray bottle to mist the mouth with water, being careful not to give too much
- Offer ice chips or ice lollies to moisten the mouth

Use of drips & feeding tubes

Sometimes it might feel that the person who is dying is not getting the care that they need because they are not on a drip. The use of drips or feeding tubes may not be beneficial in the last stages of life and it doesn't prolong life. In some instances, it can increase the person's discomfort. Speak with the doctor or nurse to discuss any concerns you have. They can look at the advantages and disadvantages and consider whether extra fluids or nutrition are needed.

In some situations, an individual may have been on a drip or had a feeding tube for some time. Where possible the person who is dying and those close to them, should be involved in discussions and decisions to reduce or stop these forms of support when there is evidence that continuing may no longer be of benefit to the person or where the individual now wishes to discontinue.

Good communication

It is helpful to have clear conversations with the healthcare professionals involved in the care of the person important to you, so that everyone understands what is going to happen, what to expect and what would be best to keep them comfortable. Don't be afraid to ask if you would like more information.

Other ideas that may help

Many families or friends find it helpful to look at other ways they can provide comfort and support

- Continue other forms of support such as gentle massage, skin care, music and conversation
- Keep the person company - talk to them, read to them, watch films together or simply sit and hold their hand

Nutrition and Dietetics

Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust

Contact number: 01423 553329

Email: hdft.dietitians1@nhs.net