North London Hospice

Eating and drinking at end of life



This guide is designed to help reassure you and give advice around eating and drinking towards the end of life.

It describes some of the changes that can take place and what is happening and why. However, if you still have any questions after you have read this, please do ask one of our clinical team.

Our priority is to provide the right support to our patients and their carers, families and friends, tailoring our care to the specific needs of each patient. We aim to take your views into account and to respond to any concerns around possible discomfort and distress.

Eating and drinking less or not at all as someone is nearing the end of their life, is usually due to one or many of the following: difficulties with swallowing, nausea, reduced appetite, little energy, less engagement or decreasing consciousness.

It is very common for a decline in appetite to happen at this time, as the body cannot digest food as it once did. Weight loss may happen no matter how much is eaten and taste changes may occur. You may find the person you are caring for only want drinks.

Here are some suggestions of things you can do to help:

- Offer small snacks throughout the day.
- Ensure food is cut into small pieces so less is required.
- If chewing is difficult, offer soft or purée food.
- Finger foods can help maintain a level of independence.
- If drinking is easier than eating, offer sips of smoothies, soups, hot or cold drinks.
- If you are helping them to eat, allow them time to swallow.
- Never force someone to eat or drink. If they cough or choke frequently when eating and drinking, they may need more assistance.
- It is important that they sit upright when eating.
- Have drinks close at hand. Try offering frequent sips or using ice chips or ice pops to keep the mouth moist and fresh.
- Try a beaker if lips no longer fit tightly around the rim of a glass.
- Sometimes thicker fluids can be easier to swallow e.g. smoothies or milkshakes.
- You may find very cold or warm drinks might be easier to swallow.

As someone approaches the end of their life, the desire or need for food and drink lessens and typically their body will no longer be able to get the usual benefits from it.

This can be hard to accept, and you may worry and wonder if they are thirsty, hungry or suffering. Sometimes, eating and drinking more than is needed can cause discomfort.

It is believed that a natural analgesic (pain relieving) effect is produced by not eating and drinking near the end of life. This is nature at work helping the dying person to be more comfortable. It is a natural process and to be expected.

Comfort can be given in lots of other ways. People approaching death usually do not feel thirsty when their mouth is kept moist. Try applying some water-based lip balm to the lips, moisten and clean the tongue, lips and mucous membranes in the mouth with a very soft toothbrush or other oral hygiene brush, or moisten the mouth with a few drops of water from an oral syringe or by placing ice chips in the mouth.

Please be reassured that our team is here to provide support, guidance and compassionate care. Ensuring the patient's comfort, dignity and wellbeing throughout their end-of-life journey is always our priority.