

End of Life Care

How carers, nurses and family can support patients who are close to the end of their life

Eating and Drinking at the End of Life:

Reduced appetite and fluid intake is normal and expected as the body slows down. The goal changes from nutrition to comfort, enjoyment and dignity. It is important to respect the patient's wishes, cultural preferences and cues. Offer choices and accept that intake may vary greatly from day to day.

How to help:

- Sit the patient as upright as possible;
- Ensure the patient is awake and alert before offering anything;
- Offer teaspoon sized mouthfuls, in small amounts (not full meals), more frequently;
- Encourage the patient to participate in feeding themselves as much as they can. Try hand over hand assistance before feeding the patient;
- Allow the patient plenty of time to eat and drink as swallowing may be slow;
- Watch the patient closely for cues; if they turn away from the cup or spoon, do not continue; if they are holding food in their mouth, pause, encourage them to clear their mouth, offer an empty spoon to stimulate a swallow, remove any leftover food and decide whether to carry on or try again later;
- Offering strong flavours, fridge cold or warm drinks may help;
- Stop if you observe persistent coughing that is distressing for the patient, if they become fatigued or if alertness is reduced.

What to offer:

- Try to offer favourite foods or flavours, soft, smooth, moist foods are likely to be easier to manage;
- Avoid dry, crumbly foods and mixed textures (solids and liquids in one mouthful);
- Offer drinks via a teaspoon or open cup, consider offering slightly thick drinks (IDDSI level 1) if the patient is coughing and this is distressing for them;
- It is essential to offer regular mouth care to ensure that any food debris is removed from the mouth, to keep the mouth clean and prevent a build-up of bacteria. Good mouth care can reduce feelings of thirst even when not drinking, see *Leaflet 4: Mouth Care*;
- If oral intake is consistently difficult consider offering mouth care using different flavours, to allow the patient to taste flavour without the need to swallow food or drink.

Key Safety points:

- Always prioritise comfort over amount of food taken;
- Assist the patient slowly and carefully;
- Stay with the patient for the whole drink or meal;
- Never force food or fluids;
- Stop if oral intake is distressing for the patient.

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