Nutrition Concerns with Advanced Illness or End of Life

Eating is a natural part of life. Food plays a role in giving us energy and keeping us healthy, and is an important part of many social activities. However, people with advanced illness frequently lose their appetite, or have a hard time eating or drinking. For some people, the stomach and bowels begin to function less. To feed someone in this situation may cause a person to feel sick or uncomfortable. At the end of life, it is important to not push or force a person to eat or drink.

People often have many questions during this time. Below are some answers to common questions. This is just a starting point. Please talk to the health care team if you have any questions. They can also help manage the person’s symptoms and improve his or her quality of life.

Is my loved one starving to death?

When faced with advanced illness or end of life, your loved one has a disease or condition that they are not going to be able to get better from. They may not even feel hungry because when someone is very ill, the body slows down and feelings of hunger and thirst shut off. In some people, even if food and fluids are given, the body may not be able to use the nutrition.
What may be causing this decrease in intake?

There are many reasons why changes in eating occur with advanced illness or when a person nears death. Some are related to:

- Disease or illness getting worse
- Feeling sick with nausea or vomiting
- Decreased appetite
- Feeling of fullness
- Having diarrhea or constipation
- Having changes in taste
- Problems chewing or swallowing
- Feeling weak, having fatigue, other illness or side effects
- Fear or feeling anxious or depressed

When the appetite slows down what can I do to increase intake?

Here are some things you may try:

- Offer favorite foods in smaller amounts, more often.
- Try offering small amounts of nutritional supplements such as Ensure, Boost or Carnation Instant Breakfast.
- Keep favorite snacks and drinks available at all times.

But remember, feeding the person may cause discomfort or increase anxiety.

Is not eating painful?

Healthy people feel hunger pains when they do not eat, but people who are very sick may not feel these pains. Also, coughing, chest congestion and nausea may decrease when a person does not eat or drink.
Can they become dehydrated and is it painful?

Dehydration, not taking in enough fluids, may actually bring relief from some problems. For example, vomiting may decrease or stop. Coughing, congestion and mucus in the lungs may also decrease. Dry mouth or thirst can be helped with good mouth care. Also, you may offer ice chips.

What if my loved one wants to eat or drink? Could that cause problems?

Some persons are not alert enough or not able to eat or swallow correctly due to illness. In this situation it is possible that eating or drinking could cause food or fluid to fall into the lungs. This could cause illness like pneumonia or problems breathing. If a person is alert and wants to eat or drink, the pleasure of eating and drinking may override concerns about pneumonia. This should be discussed further with your healthcare team.

Should artificial nutrition or hydration be started?

Each person's situation is unique. Early in a serious illness, artificial nutrition tube feeding, or IV nutrition (TPN), or hydration may help persons who are not able to eat enough to meet their calorie and protein needs and keep from feeling hungry or thirsty. However, as the body weakens or the disease gets worse, tube feeding or IVs may be a burden and may increase the risk for infection. Tubes can be uncomfortable and tube feedings can cause bloating, nausea, diarrhea, or aspiration (choking into the lungs). IV fluids can also cause discomfort.

For each person, the benefits of artificial nutrition or hydration need to be compared to the risks. The person’s written preferences should be included in the decision. In some cases, artificial nutrition may even do more harm than good. Your healthcare team will help guide you through this process.
What about deciding to stop artificial nutrition or hydration?

Making a decision to stop artificial nutrition, such as tube feeding, is difficult. The person’s comfort and quality of life should be considered.

For each person, the benefits of artificial nutrition or hydration need to be compared to the risks and drawbacks. Your healthcare team will help you through this process.

Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.