Nutrition Concerns with Advanced Illness or End of Life

Eating is a natural part of life. Food gives us energy, keeps us healthy and is an important part of many social activities. A person with advanced illness or at the end of life does not have hunger or thirst like a healthy person. They often lose their appetite, or have a hard time eating or drinking. A life limiting illness can cause the functions of the stomach and bowels to slow down. Trying to eat or drink in this situation may cause physical symptoms that lead to discomfort or complications.

People often have questions about how to maintain their quality of life while managing their symptoms at this stage of their illness. Some answers to common questions are included in this handout, but it is important to talk to your health care team about any concerns you may have about your nutrition.

What happens if I do not eat?

When faced with advanced illness or end of life, it is normal and expected, for the body to start shutting down. You may not even feel hungry because as the body slows down, feelings of hunger and thirst decrease. Even if food and fluids are given, your body may not be able to use the nutrition.

What causes these changes at the end of life?

There are many reasons why eating may become difficult with advanced illness or at the end of life, including:

- Disease or illness gets worse
- Sick with nausea or vomiting
- Decreased appetite

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

© April 9, 2018. The Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center – Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital and Richard J. Solove Research Institute.
• Feeling of fullness
• Diarrhea or constipation
• Changes in taste
• Problems with chewing or swallowing
• Feeling weak or having fatigue
• Other illness or side effects
• Feeling anxious, fearful or depressed

When my appetite slows down, is there anything my family can do?

Feeding a person with advanced illness or at the end of life may cause discomfort or complications. If your family wants to help, here are some safe things they can try:

• Offer your favorite foods in smaller amounts and more often.
• Give small amounts of nutritional supplements such as Ensure, Boost or Carnation Instant Breakfast.
• Have your favorite snacks and drinks on hand at all times.

Does not eating cause pain?

No, healthy people feel hunger pains when they do not eat, but people who are very sick may not feel these pains. At this stage of illness, coughing, chest congestion and nausea may decrease when a person does not eat or drink.

What happens when someone drinks less?

Dehydration caused by 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 lessen. Good mouth care and ice chips can help reduce dry mouth or thirst.

Nutrition Concerns with Advanced Illness or End of Life
Are there times when eating and drinking can cause problems?

If you are not alert enough to eat or unable to eat and swallow properly, it is possible food or fluid may fall into the lungs. This can cause pneumonia or problems with breathing. If you are alert and want to eat or drink, the pleasure of eating and drinking may outweigh concerns about pneumonia. Talk with your health care team about what is best for you.

Should artificial nutrition or hydration be started?

Every person’s situation is different. Early in a serious illness, tube feeding, IV nutrition (TPN), or hydration may help if someone is not able to eat enough to meet their calorie and protein needs. But as the body weakens or the disease gets worse, tube feeding or IVs may be a burden and can increase the risk for infection. Tubes can be uncomfortable and tube feedings can cause bloating, nausea, diarrhea or aspiration (choking into the lungs).

The benefits of artificial nutrition or hydration need to be compared to the risks. If you have written wishes about artificial nutrition at the end of life, these should be taken into account when making a decision.

What about stopping artificial nutrition or hydration?

Making a decision to stop artificial nutrition, such as tube feeding, is not easy. At times, artificial nutrition may do more harm than good. Comfort, quality of life and your written wishes about artificial nutrition should be taken into account when making a decision. Your health care team can provide more information to help you understand this process.