



Since 1978, Hosparus Health, a fully accredited not-for-profit hospice and palliative care organization, has provided medical care, grief counseling, symptom and medication management and more for people facing serious and chronic illnesses in Kentucky and Indiana.

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## Nutrition and the Hospice Patient



# Q&A: Nutrition and the Hospice Patient

## Why doesn't my family member want to eat?

Giving and sharing food is one way we show love to others. It can be hard on the caregiver and the patient not to be able to share offerings of food and drink.

When someone is sick and not active, his or her body cannot use the food and water as it once did. For example, when someone has cancer, the disease may give off chemicals that affect taste and give a feeling of fullness. Treatments and medications also may cause loss of appetite.

## Won't the patient have more strength and feel better by eating & drinking more?

Not necessarily, forcing food and water may make the person feel worse instead of better and may cause nausea, discomfort and fullness. Diarrhea or constipation may become worse if someone is given too much to eat or drink.

The body may not be able to use the fluids and water may build up in the lungs, heart and abdomen. This could result in difficulty breathing.

## Am I starving him or her by not forcing food and water?

You are not starving your loved one. Loss of appetite is a normal part of being seriously ill.

Remember the last time you had the flu or a long illness? Did you lose your appetite and desire to eat? This may be how your loved one now feels about food.

You can help by offering small amounts of food several times a day instead of large meals. Offer favorite foods and don't insist that they eat or force them to eat more than they want. People usually feel better when they have a choice about what to eat or drink.

Use your time to enjoy one another by finding new ways to care for your loved one. Perhaps it would help to look at old photos, play cards or watch a favorite movie. A hand or foot massage is another way to show you care. A visit with an old friend during the dinner hour rather than being expected to eat a full meal may be more enjoyable. Listening to favorite music, remembering good times or just being with you may comfort your loved one.

## Why is he or she losing weight?

When someone has a serious disease, weight may be lost even though the person is eating. If the person has cancer, more calories may be used because of the rapid growth of cancer cells. Other illnesses also may increase the body's use of calories.

It may help to increase the calories and protein in the food the person is eating. There are many different nutritional supplements available in the pharmacy or grocery store. Hosparus Health can suggest ways to provide increased nutrition. A meeting with a registered dietitian also may help.

## What about dehydration?

Isn't it painful and harmful? No, dehydration is part of the natural dying process and is not painful at that time.

Studies show that the body releases its own natural painkillers as part of the dying process.

The most uncomfortable part is that the person's mouth is very dry.

You can help by offering ice chips if the person can still swallow. The mouth can be swabbed out using a toothette or gently cleaned with a mixture of water and hydrogen peroxide. The lips can be moistened with a lubricating ointment or dabbed with a cool, wet cloth.

## Would it be helpful to put in a feeding tube or give fluids through the veins?

Earlier in an illness, a feeding tube or IV fluids may be helpful. As the body gets sicker, the need for food and fluid drops.

Forcing food and fluid through tubes may actually cause fullness or bloating, diarrhea or constipation, fluid buildup in the lungs and heart, or swelling in the legs or arms. The time it takes to learn about IV fluids or feeding tubes may keep the family from giving other care needed at this time, such as touching, hugging and talking.

## How do we know what is best at this time?

Sometimes this can be difficult. If possible, let your loved one decide about options and what he or she wants. Many express their wishes related to feeding tubes or IV fluids through their Advance Directives such as in a Living Will. Perhaps you can recall conversations in which wishes were discussed prior to the illness.

Hosparus Health can help you understand the various treatments, how they work and whether or not they would be helpful.