

CONVERSATIONS IN LONG TERM CARE

Nutrition and Swallowing at end of life

As people approach the end of life it is not uncommon for your loved one to:

- become weaker
- become more drowsy, and
- lose their ability to swallow food and drink.

Feelings of hunger and thirst tend to decrease significantly as an individual approaches the end of life. Your loved one may eat and drink less and may lose the desire to eat. This is the body's way of showing that food is no longer needed which is expected at end of life.

It is important not to force eating at this stage as food or drink may cause congestion in the lungs, upset stomach and bloating.

If the person desires food or drink, however, it may be offered for pleasure. If the person indicates they would like some food or drink:

- check with the nurse before offering food or drink and make sure the correct food texture and liquid consistency is being offered,
- offer food or drink only when the person is alert, sitting upright, and is able to participate in eating (opening mouth, taking bites from spoon or sips from a cup or spoon and showing interest),
- offer one small sip or bite at a time,
- be sure the Adam's Apple moves up and down before offering another sip or bite,
- be sure to follow the person's lead and stop offering food or drink before the person becomes too tired,
- let the nurse know if there were any problems such as coughing, a wet sounding voice, wet breathing sounds (or choking),

When someone does not eat or drink well we expect they will become dehydrated. At end of life, this may actually increase comfort, as it decreases the buildup of secretions and congestion. Ask the dietitian for more information.

The most important way to help keep a person comfortable at this time is to offer to clean the mouth by applying lip/mouth moisturizer (water-based) and by cleaning the mouth with a moist, ultra-soft bristled toothbrush. Ask the nurse for more information.

Remember, there are other ways to show you care. Simply being present can offer comfort to your loved one and this is what matters most. Ask the Social Worker and/or Spiritual Health Practitioner for advice and help.

References are available upon request.