

The Palliative Pain & Symptom Management Program



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Food For Thought



If Your Loved One Isn't Eating

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Feeding the Dying

When the body is dying all the organs begin to shut down and work less and less effectively. For instance, the heart, brain, liver and kidneys (to name a few) are less and less able to perform their functions. The digestive system also becomes disabled, often to the point where food just cannot be digested. The dying person will lose his or her appetite and may be troubled with nausea and vomiting when encouraged to eat. This is the body's way of showing that food is no longer necessary.

It's A Natural Process

Not eating is a normal part of dying. Strange as it may sound, there



are definite advantages to little or no food intake as death approaches. This is nature's way of leading to a peaceful death.

There Are Benefits To Not Eating

As fluid/food intake is reduced, so the tissues become dryer and shrink. This means that if there is a tumor present there is less pressure on/from the tumor. The tumor itself may become smaller. The need for pain medication may also be less.

Swelling of the feet, legs and other tissues will be reduced. If fluid has accumulated in the abdomen, comfort will be promoted as there will be less pressure on the organs; breathing may also be easier.

Urine Output will go down; meaning that less energy will be used going to the bathroom. If bladder control is a problem, it means less incontinence and a greater sense of dignity.

Lung Secretions will be less, resulting in less congestion and easier, more comfortable breathing.



If Your Loved One Isn't Eating

Pharyngeal secretions thicken and diminish and for the dying person who has difficulty swallowing this means less need for the discomforts of suctioning and as with the decrease in lung secretions the sensation of drowning is minimized, Lessened gastric secretions reduce the incidence of nausea and vomiting. Ketone Formation happens when food intake is low. The importance of this is that it creates a feeling of euphoria or well-being. It works to reduce the anxiety one may feel in the face of coming death.

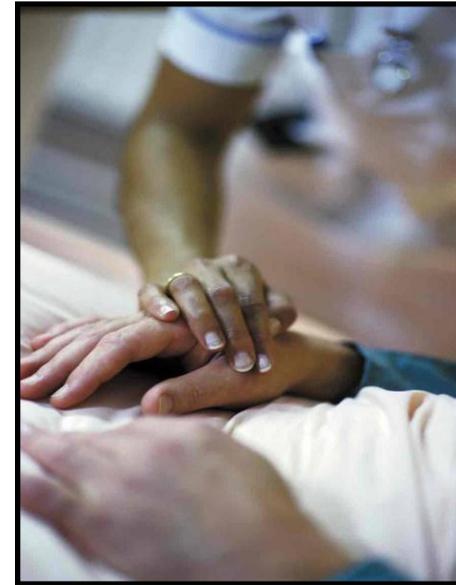


There Are Some Disadvantages Too

Hunger is rarely experienced. However, thirst may occur initially. It is easily relieved by sipping water or sucking on ice chips or hard candy. The thirst usually disappears after the first few days. Careful attention to keeping the mouth moist and clean will enhance comfort. Artificial feeding can keep a person alive for a long time. However, studies show that complications may actually shorten the life span.

Considerations

Is the dying person able to make his/her own decisions? If not, does anyone have Power of Attorney for personal care? Has he/she expressed any wishes about feeding at the end?



You may not know what to do with your time if you are not offering food. You may feel conflict between yourself and your loved one if your efforts to encourage eating are not successful. You may also feel conflict with the staff if their efforts are not successful. You may be losing your sense of hope as you see your loved one slipping away and leaving you powerless to stop it. You may fear that your loved one will be abandoned.

Is There Anything You Can Do?

While there are not any easy answers, you may find the following helpful:

- Avoid conflict by supporting your loved one's decision (no matter what it is).
- Discuss your feelings with others
- Try and make your remaining time with your loved one meaningful by talking, holding hands, being there for them, looking at photo albums, giving back rubs, playing cards, reminiscing, etc. This will provide quality time for you and will show that you care.

What Are Your Feelings

You probably feel very emotional and overwhelmed by what is happening. There are valid reasons for this. In our society, we see food as a basic necessity of life. We equate it with love. We view a good appetite as a sign of good health. Most of our social functions involve eating or drinking. You are likely to feel guilty and helpless because you are not providing a basic necessity. You may be afraid that others will see you as uncaring.