

You may feel very emotional and overwhelmed about everything that is happening. There are varied reasons for these feelings. 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 social functions involve eating or drinking. You may feel guilty and helpless because you are not providing a basic need.

“In advanced terminal illness, caloric supplementation does not improve strength, functional status or longevity. Quality of life may actually be improved by deemphasizing food intake and finding other ways of directing the need to nurture.”

Dr. Mike Harlos, Medical Director, Winnipeg Palliative Care Program

**For more information
please contact the
Palliative Care Staff**

Or

**Canadian Virtual Hospice
Website at:
www.virtualhospice.ca**

Other Palliative Care brochures:

- **Palliative Care Program**
- **Pain Control at End of Life**
- **Understanding Your Grief**
- **What to Expect at the End of Life**

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Food and Fluids at the End of Life

Palliative Care Program

*There is no road map
for this journey.
Every person's life
and death is unique.*

Loving Support is Often the Most Important Nourishment

As death approaches, people often experience a decrease in appetite with little or no interest in food and fluids. They may be unable to digest food or take fluids by mouth.

While a decrease in appetite and thirst is not painful and is an expected part of dying, it can sometimes be a worry. People are often concerned about reduced food and fluid intake. It is natural for families to continue to want to provide nourishment at this time.

In order to make the best decisions about hydration, it's important the client, family and health care team work together. Your Health Care Providers can offer information and advice about the role of food and fluids and ways to handle decreasing intake.

As death approaches, needs and wishes can change, making it necessary to keep asking, "What is helpful for this person at the time?" There will be no single "right answer" to this question as it will always depend on unique circumstances of each individual.

Helpful Things to Consider At End of Life

- Decreasing food and fluid intake is a common, natural part of the dying process.
- Most dying people do not experience thirst or hunger as death approaches
- Giving food and fluids by artificial means (e.g. tube feeds) does not prolong life or improve its quality.
- Providing food and fluids by artificial means may, in fact, increase distressing symptoms such as shortness of breath, respiratory congestion, restlessness, nausea and vomiting.
- When people have difficulty swallowing; eating and drinking may put them at risk for choking.
- Providing fluids by artificial means does not prevent or improve thirst, relieve dry mouth, or provide nutrition.
- Frequent mouth care helps relieve a dry mouth (see general tips for mouth care).
- Dehydration causes substances to be released in the brain leaving a peaceful and pleasant feeling of euphoria.

Providing Care and Comfort

General tips for mouth care:

- Keep lips moist with water soluble gels (lip balm), artificial saliva or unscented moisturizer.
- Use a moist cloth, soft toothbrush or plain mouth swab to wipe mouth; avoid glycerin and lemon swabs, which can dry the mouth further.
- Mist the mouth with water, being careful not to give too much.

When the person is still able to swallow safely:

- Give mouth care as above.
- Let the person decide on the amount of food or fluid they want.
- Offer ice chips or popsicles.

When the person is no longer able to swallow:

- Continue mouth care as above.
- Consider offering other kinds of support, such as gentle massage, skin care, music and conversation.