



Nutrition and Hydration at End of Life

We live in a society where every major event revolves around food: Every holiday dinner, family gathering and party. Food is a symbolic gesture of giving love.

As someone nears the end of his or her life, however, nutrition and hydration means something entirely different. A loved one's first reaction is often, "But I don't want them to starve to death. I don't want to see them suffer." It is a common and understandable feeling when a loved one is dying.

In hospice care there are some keys to always remember:

- The primary goal is always comfort
- What is right for one person, may not be the same for another
- The wishes of the patient are the most important

It is important to understand loss of appetite and weight is a normal part of the dying process. Nearly all hospice patients will likely stop eating and drinking at some point as their illness progresses. For some, it will be a very slow change, and for others it might be sudden or abrupt.

- Food intake at this stage does not provide comfort. It may actually increase discomfort for the patient.
- The body begins to naturally shut down, and nutrition is no longer needed and can't be processed.
- Fluids may greatly increase painful swelling and breathing problems.
- The body will release endorphins at this stage, and hunger will not be an issue nor it will not cause any pain.

Someone may experience thirst, but oral hygiene and treatment with oral swabs, lip balms and/or ice chips are the most beneficial. Some hospice patients will want a meal, eat only one bite, and that is enough to satisfy them. It is important to remember not to force them to eat or make them feel guilty for not eating. They are not "giving up" – their body simply does not need the calories any longer.

It is also important to remember the individual will not die from starvation: He or she will die from the illness or overall condition. Helping other staff and families with this is crucial. If you have any concerns, call the Cedar Hospice team and let them know the family may need additional education to help them.

© 2009 Cedar Home Health, Hospice & Pathfinders

Fulfilling Hope