

I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO ...

My Loved One Isn't Eating or Drinking

When your loved one does not want to eat or drink, you may experience feelings of helplessness. Food is such a powerful metaphor for love and the sharing of food is such a binding force, that a loved one refusing good can cause you great pain and anguish.

We are socialized to think that food/nutrition will always make us better: "If we don't eat, we will not stay healthy." It is natural to want to feed someone who is ill. Providing food may seem like the only tangible thing you can do for your loved one, and it can become the focus of your care. But feeding a loved one who is dying will not ease suffering or extend life. In fact, food or drink can make your loved one feel nauseated and uncomfortable. (*What to Expect in the Last Days of Life: Temmy Latner Centre for Palliative Care*)

If your loved one refuses food and/or liquids, it is important to respect his or her wishes. Resisting the temptation to feed is difficult, but it's important to allow your loved one the autonomy to decide whether he or she wants to eat and/or drink.

When a loved one stops eating or drinking, you may wonder whether intravenous fluids (IVs) and/or tube feedings would help. Your loved one may have received fluids and nutrition in this way at various stages of the disease, but artificial feeding offers few benefits at the end of life and can cause harm (see box); and it will not change the outcome.

As difficult as it can be when a loved one refuses to eat or drink, it is important to remind yourself that your loved one is dying from the underlying disease and not from lack of food or drink. Even when your loved one no longer wants to eat, you can still do things that provide comfort and enhance quality of life -- such as being there and listening to his or her wishes.

BENEFITS AND BURDENS OF PROVIDING IV FLUIDS AND NUTRITION

Benefits:

1. May correct fluid and electrolyte imbalance so the person feels more comfortable
2. May reduce confusion if it is caused by dehydration
3. May provide emotional comfort for people who want to have food and fluids

Burdens:

1. Reduces mobility because the person must be attached to tubes.
2. Less mobility means the person is more likely to experience skin problems including bedsores
3. Requires repeated needle picks, which may be painful
4. May increase the volume of stomach fluids, which may cause vomiting
5. May increase respiratory secretions, which can cause congestion and shortness of breath.
6. May cause swelling in the arms and legs, which is uncomfortable
7. May increase the risk of aspiration pneumonia
8. May increase the risk of infection at the site where the tube or IV is inserted