

Food & Fluid Issues at End of Life

What is nutrition and hydration?

Nutrition is the feeding of our body with foods and fluids

Hydration is giving liquids for the body

What to report to the Hospice/Palliative Care Team?

Tell the team if the patient:

- Is unable to eat or drink
- Has trouble swallowing
- Has a dry mouth or tongue
- Loses more than five pounds in a week
- Has less urine
- Becomes confused or drowsy

What can be done?

The team will try to find a reason for the problem and discuss possible treatments. It is normal for the patient to have less appetite and drink less as the disease continues. Treatment choices will depend on your wishes and the patient's illness.

Things you can do:

- Encourage favorite foods and drinks
- Offer drinks or sips often ñ at least every two hours
- Clean the mouth often ñ a pleasant tasting mouth may make food taste better
- Help other family members and friends understand why eating and drinking may cause the patient to be uncomfortable
- Support the patient's decision not to eat or drink
- Encourage the patient to rest before and after a meal
- If dentures do not fit well, consult a dentist
- Make mealtime a quiet and pleasant time ñ candles, flowers, soft music and good conversation all help
- Offer small meals and use smaller dishes
- If nausea is a problem, serve small portions of salty (not sweet), dry foods and clear liquids
- Find other ways besides food and drink to show the patient you care. For example, offer the patient a massage or look through a picture album together

Other HPNA Patient / Family Teaching Sheets are available at www.hpna.org.

Reference

Core Curriculum for the Generalist Hospice and Palliative Nurse. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company; 2005.

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