



Information Sheet

Feeding and Hydration

As a caregiver, it is natural to want to feed someone. We frequently associate food with caring and love and many of our celebrations are associated with food.

These notions make it very difficult to let go of the idea that someone needs nutrition and can cause feelings of guilt and helplessness on the part of the caregiver.

People often feel it is cruel to deny food and fluids and that the person will suffer and die sooner as a result of withholding this basic necessity.

There is no research to support the idea that the person will die sooner and I will help you understand what happens to the body that makes food and fluids unnecessary at this stage of the dying process in the coming slides.

What is actually happening?

For persons in the final phase of illness, the withholding of food and fluids is not painful. To the contrary, the administration of food and fluids to dying persons can extend their general discomfort and frustrate their desire to let go and allow nature to take its course. When a person is in the late stages of life and are actively dying, many changes occur in the body.

The function of the major organs begins to deteriorate and the digestive system shuts down causing the person's appetite to diminish. Providing food at this stage may cause nausea and vomiting and can also cause severe abdominal discomfort.

When the body is slowing and shutting down, fluids can go "down the wrong way" causing choking and possibly aspiration leading to aspiration pneumonia. This can often result in early and uncomfortable death.

A natural process

- Ceasing to eat and drink is a normal part of the dying process
- Hunger is rarely experienced
- Nature's path to a peaceful death
- Decreased secretions
- Euphoria caused by ketone formation
- Decreased anxiety

Supportive care strategies

- Be mindful of symptoms
- Careful assessment
- Treat all symptoms
- Moisten lips and mouth
- Provide "Comfort Care"