

# Comfort feeding in the in the last days of life (guidance for families and carers)

## End of Life Care

Information for Patient and Family

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## Introduction

Food and drink are a normal part of daily life. We offer food and drink as a way to show that we care. In the last days of life, most people will stop feeling hungry or thirsty. They may only want to eat or drink very little. Your relative/ friend may not even want to eat or drink anything at all. This can be upsetting for family and friends to see.

## Mouth care

A dry mouth is common in the last days of life. This can be caused by drugs, oxygen treatment or breathing through the mouth. Having a dry mouth does not mean that your relative/ friend is dehydrated but it may be uncomfortable for them. Keeping the mouth clean and moist using sponges or sips of drink can help. Continuing to clean the teeth can also help.

## Swallowing

When a person gets weaker, food and drink may go down 'the wrong way' when they try to swallow. This means that:

- food and drink is going into the lungs instead of the stomach
- it can make people cough or feel sick
- it may cause a serious chest infection that is difficult to treat
- it does not mean that they must stop eating and drinking. It means that they are taking a risk when they do.

Swallowing tests are not often helpful because every day is different. Please let the nurses know if you notice any swallowing problems. There are things we can do to make it safer.

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or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

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## Will a drip help?

Families often ask about intravenous (IV) fluids or a 'drip'. Giving fluid this way does not usually help the dying person feel better. Good mouth care is often better to help keep the mouth moist and comfortable. A 'drip' can also cause other problems such as swelling of the arms and legs. It can also make chest secretions worse. Please ask the doctors if you would like to talk about this.

## Can they be fed by a tube?

Sometimes people ask about tube feeding or about intravenous feeding. Feeding someone this way when they are dying does not help them live longer or give them extra energy. It can cause other problems such as making them feel sick.

Offering small amounts of food and drink that they enjoy and can manage is usually better.

If they cannot manage or do not want anything to eat or drink, mouth care is the best thing to do. Please ask the doctors if you have any questions about this.

## When and how to offer food and drink

Your relative/ friend may feel different every day. Some days they may want to eat and drink. Other days they may not want anything at all. Be guided by how they are feeling. Do not worry if they only manage a very small amount.

If your relative/ friend would like to eat and drink:

- They must be awake and able to swallow
- They should sit as upright as possible. This will reduce the risk of food or drink going down the 'wrong way'. If they need help to move in the bed ask the nurses for help. Do not lift or drag them yourself. This can cause them skin damage and may hurt your back.
- Focus on the things that they like. Small, single sips of drink or small mouthfuls of food may be enough. Sucking a favourite flavour from a mouth care sponge may bring enjoyment. This could be squash, fruit juice, tea, coffee or even alcohol.
- If they are not able to chew, they could try soup, smoothies, milky drinks or pureed food. This can reduce the risk of choking.
- Offer food and drink little and often throughout the day especially:
  - If they are asking for food and drink by talking, pointing or looking at food or drink
  - Opening their mouth at the sight or smell of food or drink
  - Taking food or drink into their mouth without too much help
- If drinks go down the 'wrong way' then a thickener can sometimes help. If this makes it easier, then keep using thickener. If thickener makes no difference then thin fluids are better. Please ask the nurses about this.
- Having a clean, moist mouth makes eating and drinking easier and safer. If you would like to do mouth care, please ask the nurses to show you.

## When to stop offering food and drink

Even when someone cannot talk to you, they may be able to show that they do not want eat or drink:

- They say stop, push away the cup or spoon, or turn their head away.
- They do not open their mouth when the cup or spoon is placed to their lips.
- Food or drink stays in their mouth and they are not swallowing.
- They are becoming distressed. They may start to cough, feel they might choke or feel sick.

It is important to check that no food or drink is left in the mouth. Mouth care can help. Ask the nurses for advice if you are not sure.

## If your relative/ friend is not able to or not wanting to swallow at all

You can still offer water or tastes of favourite flavours on a mouth care sponge. This can ease feelings of dry mouth or bad tastes in the mouth.

You may also use the dry-mouth gel to help keep their mouth moist.

## Food and drink in hospital

### Menus

There are a lot of menus to choose from in hospital. You may order foods from any of these for your relative/ friend. Symbols on the menus show which meals are suitable for different dietary needs.

Menus include: Standard, Renal, Low lactose, Gluten free, Vegan, Kosher, African and West Indian.

Modified texture menus include: Level 4 (puree) , Level 5 (minced & moist) or Level 6 (soft and bite sized) .

Easy chew options on all of the menus have this symbol

### Snacks and drinks

There are lots of snack choices on the ward. These include cake, crisps, biscuits and yogurts. Ask the house keeper or nurses for the options on offer.

Drinks include squash, tea, coffee, milk, hot chocolate and Aymes shakes and soups.

Ice-cream or jelly can be ordered by the housekeeper or nurses.



## Bringing food from home

Familiar foods from home can bring comfort. It is still important to remember to store them safely.

- Room temperature: Some food can safely be kept at room temperature such as chocolate, crisps, biscuits or cakes (except if they contain cream).
- Cold food: Any food that needs to be kept in a fridge should be brought to the hospital in a cool bag. If it is not going to be eaten straight away, it can be stored in the ward fridge if there is space. All food must be labelled with your relative/ friend's name, the date and the time. Ask the nurses for some labels if you do not have any. Please do not bring in a lot of food as it can only be stored in the fridge for 24hrs. After 24hrs it is thrown away.
- Hot food. It is not possible to heat food on the ward. Ask the nurses if you are not sure what to bring in.

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