

Palliative Pain and Symptom Management Consultation Program Northeastern Ontario

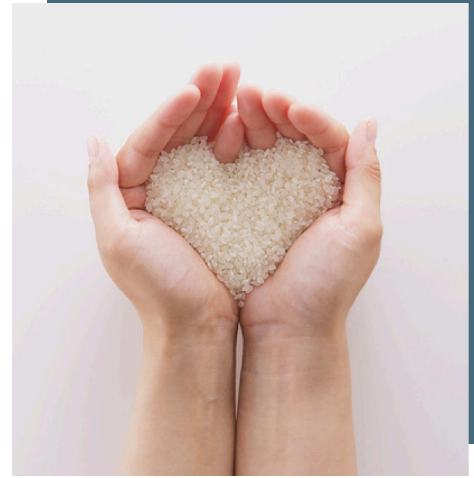
Food for Thought: Support if your loved one is not eating

FOR THE CAREGIVERS AND LOVED ONES

Check in with yourself. You probably feel very emotional and overwhelmed by what is happening. There are valid reasons for this. In our society, we see food as a necessity of life. We equate food with LOVE. We view a good appetite as a sign of good health. Most of our social functions involve eating or drinking. You may not know what to do with your time if you are not offering food. You may feel conflict between yourself and your loved one if your efforts to encourage eating are not successful. You may also feel conflict with the staff if their efforts are not successful. You may be losing your sense of hope as you see your loved one declining in health, leaving you powerless to stop it. These are natural feelings experienced during these stages.

ARE THERE DISADVANTAGES TO NOT EATING OR DRINKING AS DISEASE ADVANCES?

- Hunger is rarely experienced; however, thirst may occur initially. Thirst is easily relieved by sipping water or sucking on ice chips or hard candy. The thirst usually disappears after the first few days. Feelings of dry mouth are often misunderstood as thirst.
- Careful attention to keeping the mouth moist and clean will enhance comfort.
- Artificial feeding and hydration may be an option for some people in certain circumstances. We also have evidence to tell us that these approaches can also cause more symptoms or worsen other symptoms.
- Organ function changes when people are approaching advanced illness and end-of-life which can impact the benefit or have increased risks with artificial hydration and feeding



WHAT IS HAPPENING WHEN OUR APPETITE STARTS TO DECREASE IN ADVANCED ILLNESS AND AT END-OF LIFE?

- Appetite decreases because the body can not digest and absorb nutrients due to changes in organ function
- Allow your loved one/the patient to choose whether to eat or drink
- Eating and drinking when we do not feel hungry or thirsty can cause:
 - Nausea, vomiting, bloating, and abdominal pain.
 - It is normal for people to feel full after a few bites
- Offer foods in small amounts
- Offer pureed foods, liquid nutritional supplements, and have their favorite drinks available
- Choking and coughing may be present, especially if there are swallowing issues- speak to a member of your health care team if you are concerned about choking
- It is normal to see persistent weight loss despite ongoing food intake in advanced illness/disease
- At end of life- people may only have sips of fluid or nothing at all
 - This is not starvation, the body is preparing itself for the end of life process.

CONSIDERATIONS

- Has your loved one expressed any wishes about feeding at the end of life?
- Is your loved one able to make their own decisions?
- If not, does anyone have Power of Attorney for personal care?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ABOUT NUTRITION AND A PALLIATIVE APPROACH TO CARE

Canadian Virtual Hospice
https://www.virtualhospice.ca/en_US/Main+Site+Navigation/Home.aspx

1. Click on support
2. Click on Asked & Answered
3. Scroll down and click on Nutrition
4. Pick your nutrition topic.

