

Being with a person we love who is dying is an emotional, special time. Understanding the normal changes that can be expected may help.

“You matter because you are you. You matter to the last moment of your life, and we will do all we can not only to help you die peacefully, but also to live until you die.”

Dame Cicely Saunders

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DEHYDRATION at the end of life

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DEHYDRATION NEAR THE END OF LIFE

When a loved one approaching the end of life stops eating and drinking, families often worry and wonder if the dying person is thirsty, hungry or suffering.

Increasing evidence suggests patients close to death are more comfortable if dehydrated.

What is known about not eating or drinking?

The disease process can alter the desire to eat, the ability to digest food, and the person's interest in food. When people come within days of death, it is expected that they may eat and drink very little, refuse all food and drink, or may be unable to swallow well. These are normal expected changes.

Drinking less or not at all is usually due to one or many of the following: trouble swallowing, nausea, no appetite, little energy, turning of attention inward or "beyond", or decreasing consciousness. Normal body functions are responding to the disease process and are slowing in preparation for death. This is natural and expected.

It has been noted that the symptoms a healthy person would have from dehydration (headache, abdominal cramps and vomiting) do not occur in the dying person who is dehydrated.

It is thought that a natural analgesic effect is produced by not eating and drinking near the end of life. Nature is at work helping the dying person to be more comfortable.

WHAT CAN YOU DO THAT WILL OFFER COMFORT?

Show your caring and love in other ways:

- Spend time being together by reminiscing, giving your loved one a hand or foot massage, lying together, listening to music or just sitting quietly.

Help keep the person's mouth moist:

- People approaching death usually do not feel thirsty when their mouth is kept moist.
- Moisten and clean their tongue, lips and mucous membranes in their mouth by using a soft toothbrush for gentle brushing,

moistening their mouth with sponge toothettes dipped in water, applying lanolin to their lips, and if they are swallowing, giving them small sips of fluid.

If the person is still eating and drinking small amounts – focus on pleasure not on the amount:

- If your loved one does not want to eat, respect that food or fluids are no longer desired or cannot be tolerated.
- Do not force food or drinks. Leave the choice and amount up to the dying person.

There are specific situations when fluids may be given:

Fluids can be given by inserting a small needle just under the skin and infusing fluids in a procedure called hypodermoclysis. If fluids may benefit the specific symptoms your loved one is experiencing, your doctor will discuss this with you.