

Nutrition at the End of Life

End-of-life Changes

The body changes at the end of life. Its needs shift from the work to develop and maintain strength to a process of shutting down and preparing to let go.

The following information can help you understand the changes your loved one's body is going through and how to best nourish him or her during this time.

Food

In a variety of traditions, people gather around food (potlucks, wedding, banquets, funerals). Sharing meals is a source of nutrition, comfort and community during life.

As death approaches, the body naturally decreases its need for food to lessen the demands on the body. Appetite lessens and eventually disappears. Swallowing can become difficult.

While cravings may come and go for different foods, eating more than is needed can become physically uncomfortable.

While the desire for food lessens, your loved one's need for comfort and community remains and increases. Nourishment also comes in the form of touch, conversation, story, music, laughter and caring presence.

- Listen closely to your loved one's requests and follow his or her lead.
- Offer food. Do not feel badly if it is refused.

- Eat a balanced diet yourself so you can help maintain your strength and coping abilities. Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables and drink plenty of water.

Liquids

The healthy body is more than 60 percent water. Many people begin the day with coffee or juice, and end it with tea or water. That is what a body needs to maintain health.

People struggling with illness and disease also need liquids to keep their systems working properly. But as your loved one moves toward death and the kidneys begin to weaken and shut down, excess fluids (including intravenous fluids) can cause discomfort and even place demands on the body.

- Talk with your care team about the amount of liquids your loved one needs for hydration and comfort. Health care team members can also provide special rinses that can help with dryness and thirst.
- Swab the mouth or give small ice chips or water from a straw to wet the tongue. These will provide comfort without giving your loved one too much liquid.
- Use a water-based (nonpetroleum) lubricant on the lips and lotion on the skin. This will express care as well as meet physical needs.

Remember that each person is unique and experiences may vary. Talk with your health care team if you have questions.