

Food and Fluids at End of Life

During times of great distress, families often turn to familiar traditions for providing comfort and expressing love, and these traditions often involve food. At end of life, however, many people no longer desire food or drink.

Food is nourishment for the body and soul. It is also one of the ways we show love and provide comfort to loved ones.

When your loved one stops eating and drinking, you may wonder how to show him or her you care. Refusing food and drink is one of the symptoms of the natural dying process and not its cause. Side effects of dehydration include thirst and dry mouth, both of which can be alleviated by providing frequent and thorough mouth care.

For the majority of people, food and fluids do not increase the quality or quantity of life. In fact, forcing someone to eat or drink at the end of life may cause discomfort, including shortness of breath, bloating, gas, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea. Additionally, the muscles used to chew and swallow become weak at the end of life, causing difficulty swallowing and possibly choking.

If you have any questions about your loved one's food and fluid intake, contact your Big Bend Hospice nurse. As the caregiver, here are some ways you can provide nutritional comfort to your loved one:

- Let your loved one decide whether or not to eat or drink.
- Offer small meals or snacks.
- Eat with your loved one.
- Offer a balance of solid food and liquids.
- Offer soft food items to decrease the work of chewing and swallowing.
- Offer small chips of ice, frozen juice or popsicles; many people find these refreshing.
- Place your loved one in an upright position to eat or drink.
- Provide mouth care before and after each meal and snack.
- Avoid heavy and/or fried foods.
- Avoid foods with strong odors.

Discuss any questions or concerns you have about your loved one's change in eating or drinking habits with your Big Bend Hospice team. The "Nutrition" section of the Patient and Family Resource Guide has recipes for easy-to-make shakes and smoothies.

CALL BIG BEND HOSPICE IF:

- Your loved one stops eating and drinking altogether for more than 24-48 hours.
- If you think your loved one has choked on food or liquid.

Remember, Big Bend Hospice is here to support you. Call your Big Bend Hospice team if you have any questions or concerns at (850) 878-5310.