

Nutritional considerations for patients nearing the end of life

When an individual is nearing the end of life, it can be a difficult time for relatives and staff when it comes to supporting them to eat and drink.

The focus of care at the end of life may change and tends to be centred on helping individuals to be as comfortable as possible, and to maximize their quality of life.

What to expect

- Some individuals may have a reduced appetite and lose interest in eating and drinking when they are nearing the end of life
- This can be worrying to relatives. However, it is a natural part of the dying process. Most people nearing the end of life do not experience hunger or thirst
- It's natural for relatives to want to continue providing nutrition during this time, but it's recommended to feed only for enjoyment and when the individual freely accepts what is offered to them
- Try not to be disheartened if the individual doesn't want to eat and drink – forcing them may make them more uncomfortable; Instead, keep them company, offer to read to them, watch a film together or simply sit with them and hold their hand

Practical advice

At this stage of life, meeting nutritional requirements becomes less important and the aim will be to offer food and fluids 'little and often' or as requested by the individual.

Preferred foods may now be 'less healthy' options but this is completely acceptable.

Find out the individual's favourite food and drinks and try to offer multiple meal and snack options if the first option is declined. Let the patient choose if they would like to eat or drink.

Oral Nutritional Supplements are often requested in end of life; however, these provide no further benefit than the nutrition that can be obtained from food and fluids. Most individuals tend to enjoy and prefer the taste of ordinary food, so always promote this first.

A doctor or dietitian can advise how to fortify meals, and provide 'finger food' snack ideas and nourishing drinks recipes to maximize energy intake. If the individual cannot manage a meal, they may be able to sip on a milkshake, juice or smoothie.

Your dietitian:

Contact number:

