

End of Life Care - Eating and drinking for comfort

Eating and Drinking for Comfort

During someone's last days of life, the enjoyment of eating and drinking can enhance comfort and a sense of well-being. Certain foods and flavours may have strong and happy memories. These suggestions are to support eating and drinking so that it is as easy and stress-free as possible.

General suggestions

1. Find a comfortable position and provide support as needed. It is easier to swallow when sitting upright with the head facing forwards.
2. Choose times to eat & drink when the person is feeling relaxed with calm breathing.
3. Go slowly, wait between mouthfuls of food or drink to avoid becoming short of breath.
4. Help the person to give themselves the food & drink, as this gives control to the person. If they can't feed themselves, try 'hand over hand assistance' before feeding the person.
5. Lots of small snacks of food & drinks throughout the day / night may be easier than larger meals and drinks.
6. Smaller mouthfuls (teaspoon size) are easier to control and swallow, especially if reclined or lying down.
7. Try thicker drinks if normal drinks cause lots of coughing that is distressing. Thicker drinks move more slowly so are easier to control for swallowing. Try making smoothie drinks with a blender or buying pre-made smoothies. Thickening powders (such as Nutilis Clear) can be obtained from the GP.
8. However, it is alright to have small sips of normal drinks - unless any coughing becomes too distressing. Some people who have previously been recommended to take thickened drinks really enjoy tasting a normal cup of tea or coffee. Note that even coffee or hot chocolate made completely from full-fat milk is a little thicker than drinks made with water, so may be slightly easier to swallow.
9. Softer foods may be easier and less tiring to eat as they need less chewing. Add sauces so food is moist and can be swallowed with less effort. Mash or puree food if chewing is too tiring.
10. Choose favourite flavours and foods/drinks - these may have strong and happy memories attached!

Try different utensils:

- Normal cups are more familiar than spouted cups (unless spilling is distressing, or mouthfuls too large).
- Teaspoons give small mouthfuls of food or drink.
- A small syringe (as found in children's medicines such as 'Calpol') gives small mouthfuls. Put the syringe just into the mouth so the drink goes into the front of the mouth. Press the plunger slowly so that drink does not squirt to the back of the mouth / throat.
- Straws are easier to suck through when shorter (cut in half with scissors). Try a wide or narrow straw to see which is easier. 'Pat Saunders' straws (NRS Healthcare F17914) stop the drink falling back down the straw, so take less effort to drink with. (Available from www.nrshealthcare.co.uk or from other websites such as amazon.co.uk).

Regular mouth care helps the mouth to be clean and moist for easier eating & drinking. Do mouth care at least twice a day. Use a soft toothbrush to clean teeth and dentures, the tongue, palate and inner cheeks and gums. A sponge stick is only used to mop up leftover food & drink, and to moisten the mouth.

If you have any questions, contact the Speech & Language Therapy service directly for general advice.

To request a referral to the Speech & Language Therapy service please contact your Consultant or GP.

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Date written: October 2024

Review date: October 2029

Version: 2.0