

Eating and drinking at the end of someone's life

Information for patients, family and carers

When someone is nearing the end of their life, they will often begin to eat and drink less. This leaflet gives advice and tips on how to best support the person you are caring for to get comfort from eating and drinking.

They may experience a reduced appetite and a loss of interest in food resulting in weight loss. They may feel less thirsty and develop nausea or changes to taste or smell.

A sore or dry mouth and difficulties swallowing can also occur.

This can be a difficult and worrying time however it is common for someone to experience these symptoms as the body's processes slow down. Eating and drinking should focus on enjoyment and comfort. A referral to the dietitian is not always needed.

Tips to support eating and drinking

What someone wants to eat may vary day to day. It is normal to feel anxious if they refuse to eat and drink but it is important not to force food or drink as this can lead to discomfort and distress.

- Offer small portions of preferred food and drink that the person likes regularly throughout the day.
- Don't worry about providing a healthy balanced diet as there is usually no need to restrict particular foods at this stage.
- Avoid large drinks at meal and snack times as this can make the person feel full. Encourage regular sips of fluids between meals instead.
- Coughing or spluttering with eating and drinking can be a common problem.

If the person becomes distressed with this:

- Offer small amounts of food using a teaspoon
- Stop offering food and try again later
- Make sure the person is alert enough to eat and drink
- Encourage the person to be as upright as possible
- The person may have swallowing recommendations in place from a Speech and Language Therapist. Please speak to their healthcare team if you think they are experiencing distress when eating and drinking.

Ideas of foods to try

Small portions of food, which do not need a lot of chewing may be easier to manage. Some suggestions include:

- A small tub of yogurt, fromage frais, dessert or custard
- Ice cream or ice lollies
- Small pieces of prepared, soft fruit e.g. mango, melon, oranges, pear or banana
- Sweets or squares of chocolate
- Small pieces of scone, pancake or crumpet with butter and jam or lemon curd
- Cream cheese or cheese spread served on soft bread
- A finger sized sandwich with a soft filling e.g. egg mayonnaise, tuna mayonnaise, paté
- Cocktail sausages, mini sausage rolls, mini quiches or mini scotch eggs
- Squares of cheese
- A few 'soft' crisps such as Quavers or Wotsits.

Nourishing homemade or shop bought drinks

Small cups or glasses may be easier to manage. If the person can only manage half a glass or cup, they may still find it easier to drink from a full cup or glass. This can make swallowing easier because the person does not have to tip their head back as far. Sips of citrus flavour drinks may help if the person has a dry mouth.

Drink suggestions:

- Milkshakes – homemade or purchased from a shop
- Milky coffee
- Hot chocolate
- Malted milk drinks
- Fruit or milk based smoothies
- Fizzy drinks or fruit squash
- Fruit juice.

Other helpful points

- If there are symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, pain or constipation, speak to the healthcare team to get help with managing these.
- Encourage fresh air before offering food. Cooking smells can be off-putting especially if the person feels sick.
- Try eating together even if it is just a small amount. This can be a good chance to speak about times where you have enjoyed that food before. For example, eating fish and chips or ice cream by the sea.
- Try not to be disheartened if the person you are caring for doesn't want to eat and drink – forcing them may make them more uncomfortable. Think of other ways to provide comfort, such as keeping them company, offering to read to them, watching a film together or simply sitting with them holding their hand.
- Make sure regular mouth care is offered – this can often be more important and comforting than eating and drinking.

Tips to help with mouth and lip care:

- Keeps lips moist with lip balm
- Gently use a small spray bottle to mist the mouth with water
- Offer iced drinks or ice lollies regularly.

Nutritional supplements on prescription

Oral nutritional supplement drinks are often requested when the amount a person eats and drinks starts to become less. It is important to be aware that these provide no extra benefit to the nutrition that someone can get from normal food and drink. The person may tend to enjoy and prefer the taste of ordinary familiar foods more, so always encourage this first. Nutritional supplement drinks may cause a person to feel too full to eat foods they enjoy.

