

Appetite and Food

What is happening

Changes in appetite and food preferences are very common in serious illness and near the end of life.

Patients may:

- Eat less
- Lose interest in favorite foods
- Prefer different tastes or textures
- Eventually stop eating and drinking altogether

These changes are usually a natural part of the illness process.

Why appetite changes

There are many reasons appetite changes may occur:

- Illness changes the body's sense of taste
- Medications or prior treatments (such as chemotherapy) may affect taste
- Dry mouth can make eating uncomfortable
- As the body weakens, it naturally needs less food and fluid

As illness progresses, decreasing appetite and intake are expected.

What you may see

- Eating much smaller amounts
- Preference for soft foods or liquids
- Complaints that food "doesn't taste right"
- Dry mouth or difficulty swallowing
- Increased fatigue during meals

Near the end of life, patients may eventually:

- Stop asking for food
- Stop drinking
- Sleep more and eat very little

What you can do

Follow the patient's preferences

- Offer foods or drinks the patient requests
- Avoid pressuring or forcing food intake
- Restrict foods only if specifically advised by the hospice team

Improve comfort

- Maintain good mouth care and oral hygiene
- Make sure dentures fit comfortably
- Offer softer foods if tolerated:
 - Smoothies
 - Nutritional drinks (Ensure, Boost)
 - Soft or cool foods

Help with dry mouth and thirst

- Artificial saliva products may help dry mouth
- Small ice chips or mini ice cubes may provide comfort if drinking becomes difficult

Emotional support

Sometimes sadness, anxiety, or emotional distress may contribute to poor appetite.

Talk with the hospice team if emotional concerns seem important.

Medications

Some medications may:

- Increase appetite
- Or interfere with appetite

The hospice team can help review medications if needed.

Important understanding near the end of life

As the body begins to shut down, it is natural for eating and drinking to decrease and eventually stop.

To the best of current medical understanding:

- This process is usually not painful
- Lack of food and water at this stage is generally not believed to cause suffering
- Reduced intake is part of the natural dying process

When to call hospice

- Difficulty swallowing develops suddenly
- Choking or coughing with eating increases
- Dry mouth becomes severe
- New nausea or vomiting develops
- You are unsure how to provide food or fluids safely
- You have concerns about comfort or nutrition