



Supportive nutrition for palliative care



Nutrition in palliative care

Having a life-limiting illness or supporting someone with one can be a scary and daunting time. People's food and drink intake is often affected and carers can feel helpless and unsure of the best way to support their loved one.

It is important that the right advice is provided to help to reduce anxiety around food and drink that can be experienced at this time.





A decrease in appetite

It's common for people with a life-limiting condition to change the way they eat and drink, including having a reduced appetite, lack of interest in food or changes in taste. Fatigue and an increase in symptoms such as nausea (feeling sick) or pain can affect appetite.

This can happen even more so as the illness progresses and is a normal part of the process. As the body becomes weaker and slows down, people need less energy (calories) and the body's ability to digest food reduces. They may also be less physically able to eat by themselves.



What is the aim of supportive nutrition in palliative care?

The most important aim is to maximise or improve quality of life through comfort, symptom relief and enjoyment of food and drink. The nutritional value of food and drink or whether it is 'healthy' is not the most important factor at this stage. It is unlikely that nutrition can make a difference to length of life and some degree weight loss is common.

Nutritional supplements are unlikely to bring any additional benefit at this time, other than comfort, so should only be considered if the person requests them or a healthcare professional feels they will be of benefit.

How can carers or loved ones help?

Loss of interest in food can be difficult to come to terms with and can cause upset or worry. Providing food and drink for our loved ones is a big part of showing we care for them. Family and friends often want to continue doing this and worry that the person they are caring for might be hungry or thirsty.

Family and friends can support with providing favourite food and drinks if and when they want them. It's important that the person does not feel pressured into eating and drinking as they 'normally' would. For example it's fine to have ice cream for breakfast if that's what they fancy.

Food and drinks should be offered on a 'little and often' basis so that they don't feel overwhelmed by large portions. If someone does not feel like eating then nourishing drinks, such as milky drinks or juices, can be offered which will often require less effort.

Offering to assist the person to eat or drink if they are unable to do so themselves.

Offer mouth care – wetting their lips or applying a lip salve or mouth-moistening spray if available.

How can we help?

Please contact your Dorothy House professional if you have any further questions or concerns.

dorothyhouse.org.uk

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