

During the dying process, it is normal for people to lack the desire to eat. As their disease progresses, they may also be at higher risk for choking or having food or liquid “go down the wrong way”. Many people stop eating and drinking at the end of life due to:

- Loss of appetite or thirst
- Pain, discomfort or fatigue
- Difficulty swallowing
- Nausea
- Dry mouth
- Low level of consciousness
- Inability to sit upright
- Shortness of breath

It can be distressing when your loved one doesn't eat or drink well or stops eating altogether. However, artificial nutrition or hydration (e.g., tube feeding, IV fluids) can actually increase discomfort and present new risks without improving someone's quality of life or prolonging their life.

Comfort feeding plans can help people at the end of their life enjoy eating and drinking as safely as possible. If your loved one wishes to continue eating and drinking, a **speech-language pathologist** can develop a comfort feeding plan tailored to suit their needs.

Comfort Feeding Strategies:

- Minimize distractions while eating and drinking.
- Make sure the person is alert enough to eat or drink.
- Help them into an upright position, as tolerated.
- Offer preferred food and fluids that are easy to swallow (e.g., soft, moist foods).
- Where possible, encourage the person to feed themselves.
- Sit at eye level and slowly offer small amounts of food and fluid.
- Watch the person's throat for a complete swallow before offering the next sip or bite.
- If they cannot swallow or begin coughing or choking, remove any remaining food or drink from the mouth, then provide oral care.
- If you notice the person has difficulties drinking from a straw, try small sips from a cup or spoon.

Tips for Oral Care at End of Life

Mouth care is an important way to maintain dignity at the end of life. It can also help to alleviate symptoms like thirst and improve the experience of eating and drinking. **Here are some tips to help you provide oral care:**

- Ideally, use a soft toothbrush and a small amount of toothpaste to clean teeth and gums. Remove secretions or foam from the mouth with a suction toothbrush or a suction wand.
- For those who cannot sit upright or who are not alert, use a soft damp face cloth to gently clean the teeth, gums, inside of the cheeks and tongue.
- Apply lip balm to dry lips.
- Use a humidifier to add moisture to the air.
- Ask the health-care team to recommend alcohol-free oral hygiene products and saliva substitutes.