

References:

Vancouver/Richmond Health Board

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Byock, Ira. Patient refusal of nutrition and hydration: Walking the ever-finer line. American Journal of Hospice & Palliative Care. March/April 1995.

MacDonald, N. Ethical Issues in Hydration & Nutrition, 1998.

Bruera, E. & Fainsinger, R. Patient Based Learning – Parenteral Hydration of Terminally ill Cancer Patients, 1995

Where is the nearest community health centre in the North Shore?

Central Community Health Centre
5th Floor 132 West Esplanade
North Vancouver, 604 983-6700

West Community Health Centre
990 22nd Street
West Vancouver, 604 904-6200

What is the North Shore Palliative Care Program (NSPCP)?

The NSPCP supports the provision of palliative care for dying persons and their families at home, hospital, hospice and in the residential facilities. This is a program of the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority.

If you have any questions, or would like more information about palliative care services, contact the NSPCP.

Tax deductible receipts are issued for donations/bequests made to the NSPCP.

231 East 15th Street
North Vancouver, BC V7L 2L7
Tel: 604-984-3743

Dehydration at the End of Life

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Dehydration Near the End of Life

When a loved one, approaching the end of life, stops eating and drinking, families often worry if the patient dying is thirsty, hungry or suffering.

What is known about not eating or drinking?

The disease process alters the desire to eat, ability to digest food, and the interest in food. When people come close to death, it is expected that they may eat and drink very little, refuse all food and drink, or may be unable to swallow well. These are normal, expected changes.

Drinking less or not at all is usually due to one or many of the following: trouble swallowing, nausea, no appetite, little energy, turning of attention inward or “beyond”, or decreasing consciousness. Normal body functions are responding to the disease process and are slowing in preparation for death. This is natural and expected.

It is thought that a natural analgesic effect is produced by not eating and drinking near the end of life. Nature is at work helping the dying person to be more comfortable.

What Can You Do That Will Comfort?

Show your caring and love in other ways.

- Spend time being together by reminiscing, giving your loved one a hand or foot massage, lying together, listening to music or just sitting quietly.

Help keep their mouth moist

- People approaching death usually do not feel thirsty when their mouth is kept moist.
- Moisten and clean their tongue, lips and mucous membranes in their mouth by: using a soft toothbrush for gentle brushing, moistening their mouth with sponge toothettes dipped in water, applying lanolin to their lips, and if they are swallowing, giving them small sips of fluid.

If the person is still eating and drinking small amounts – focus on pleasure not on the amount.

- If your loved one does not want to eat, respect that food or fluids are no longer desired or cannot be tolerated.
- Do not force food or drinks. Leave the choice and amount up to the dying person.

There are specific situations when fluids may be given.

Fluids can be given by inserting a small needle just under the skin and infusing fluids. If fluids may benefit the specific symptoms your loved one is experiencing, your doctor will discuss this with you.

Being with a person we love who is dying is an emotional, special time. Understanding the normal changes that can be expected may help.

“You matter because you are you. You matter to the last moment of your life, and we will do all we can not only to help you die peacefully, but also to live until you die”
Dame Cicely Saunders