Discontinuing Food & Fluids at the End of Life

North Shore Palliative & Supportive Care Program
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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.

• Feeding under unsafe situations can result in choking and lung infections.

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.

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

The NSPCP supports the provision of palliative care for those living with a serious illness and their families and friends at home, hospital, hospice and in residential care facilities.

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 Reduced Fluid and Food Intake at the End of Life

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

What is known about not eating or drinking?

The disease process changes 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, pain relieving effect is produced by not eating and drinking near the end of life. Nature is at work to help the dying person to be more comfortable.

What Can You Do To Provide Comfort?

Show your care 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 sitting quietly.

Help Keep Their Mouth Moist.

Before proceeding with the below, please discuss with the nursing staff.

• People approaching death usually do not feel thirsty when their mouth is kept moist.

• Moisten and clean their tongue, lips and mouth by: using a soft toothbrush for gentle brushing, moistening their mouth with a sponge lollipop dipped in water, applying lip balm to their lips, and if they are alert and able to swallow, giving them small sips of water or ice chips.