

Why Does Appetite Sometimes Change in Hospice Care?

There are many reasons why you or your loved one may notice a decrease in appetite while in hospice care. Difficulty swallowing, nausea, taste changes, mouth sores, and depression are just a few reasons for appetite changes. In addition, the desire to eat or drink gradually decreases toward the end of life. This is normal.

What Can Be Done to Improve Appetite?

There are several ways to try to improve appetite for hospice patients. These include:

- Decreasing portion sizes, which helps you or your loved one feel less overwhelmed by food. Smaller, more frequent meals may work better than larger, less frequent meals.
- Try high calorie, easy-to-eat foods such as pudding, jello, ice cream, yogurt, or high calorie nutritional supplements (such as Ensure®)
- Try to avoid foods that have an odor that you/your loved one find to be too strong or unpleasant. Sometimes this means serving the food at room temperature to decrease the smell.
- Avoid greasy, spicy, and overly sweet or salty foods if they do not appeal to you/your loved one.
- Provide good mouth care and adjust any poorly fitting dentures.
- Try ice chips, cold beverages, popsicles, or artificial saliva to moisten the mouth if you/your loved one has mouth discomfort.
- Try not to be disappointed if you/your loved one decide not to eat. Instead, try a smaller portion a little bit later.

Medicines That Stimulate Appetite

- Your hospice team may recommend trying a medication that could help stimulate appetite.
- These medications are often tried for a short period of time to see if the appetite improves.
- If there is no improvement in appetite, these medications are generally stopped.

Ways to Cope

- Try to remember that loss of appetite isn't starvation. At the end of life, the body no longer needs food.
- Remember that a hospice patient's weight loss is generally NOT a reflection of poor care.
- If the patient refuses to eat, provide alternative forms of "nourishment" such as conversation, touch, music, pet visits, massage, and other acts of caring and love.
- Don't forget that your hospice team is available to answer all your questions about appetite.

References

1. Bruera E, Dev R. Palliative care: Assessment and management of anorexia and cachexia. In: UpToDate, Smith TJ, Givens J, Savarese DMR (eds), UpToDate, Waltham, MA. Updated July 15, 2020.
2. Del Fabbro E, Dalal S, Bruera E. Symptom control in palliative care--Part II: cachexia/anorexia and fatigue. J Palliat Med. 2006 Apr;9(2):409-21.

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