



University Hospitals Birmingham
NHS Foundation Trust



Information for care givers: eating, drinking and mouth care at the end of life

Building healthier lives

UHB is a no smoking Trust

Throughout our lifetime, we go through a number of different life stages. The food and drink we enjoy and choose not only nourishes us but helps to build positive memories and experiences. The end of someone's life is a hugely significant stage, where care needs can change.

Reduced need for food and drink

At the end of life, our need for fluid and food changes, as the body starts to slow down. Your loved one may show much less interest in food and may stop eating and drinking altogether. Although as carers this can be quite upsetting to see, this is a normal process. Forcing people to eat at this stage can cause the patient discomfort.

There is also evidence to show that giving artificial nutrition through a tube or intravenous (IV) fluids may also not be helpful for the patient.

Taste for comfort

At the end of life, it is not usually necessary that patients are kept 'nil by mouth', you may wish to speak to the ward staff, if you have any concerns about this.

As family and friends, you know the person the best. You can tell the ward staff about flavours your loved one may enjoy and can be shown by healthcare professionals how to provide these. This can include juice, squash, fizzy drinks, tea, coffee and it may also be possible to bring in small quantities of alcoholic drinks.

If the team feel that oral fluids may be suitable, the following guidance may be helpful:

1. Ensure the mouth is clean
2. Dip the stick or foam sponge into the flavour, making sure all the excess fluid is tapped away
3. Apply to the lips and tongue with a sponge (throw foam sponges away after two applications)
4. Repeat every hour (or as desired by the patient)

Remember this should be comfortable for the patient. If it is making the patient distressed at all, then it is a good idea to stop.

Mouth care

Mouth care is more than just brushing the teeth. It also involves cleaning the lips, gums, inside of the cheeks and upper and lower lips; this will help the person to feel comfortable, clean and have fresh breath. Good mouth care can help support daily needs, but also maintains dignity for a person.

Mouth care is provided by the nursing staff, although if this something you wish to support with, then the nursing staff may be able to support and guide you.

Mouth care items, which are available on the wards and may be used to provide comfort mouth care at the end of life, include:

- **Very soft toothbrush:** this can be dipped in familiar smelling toothpaste dissolved in water
- **Lip balm:** to treat and prevent dry lips, you may wish to bring in a preferred flavour
- **Mouth moisturising gels:** relieves dryness and adds moisture to the mouth. The gel is gently massaged into any areas of dryness, tongue, palate, inside cheeks and inside upper and lower lips. It can also be massaged into the lips especially the corners of the mouth
- **Mouth care sponges (e.g. Moi-Stiks):** these look like large cotton buds; they are soaked in artificial saliva. They gently lubricate the soft tissues inside the mouth and lips. They can gently slide into the cheeks and upper and lower lips without disturbing the person. Wipe inside the mouth to ensure the cheeks and lips are not sticking to the teeth

Other ways to support your loved one

As well as the above ideas, there are many other ways of supporting your loved one.

Even though a person at the end of their life may be unable to smile, speak or respond, they may benefit from your ongoing companionship.

Keep offering other forms of support:

- Physical touch such a gentle massage, holding hands, skincare with their favourite creams
- Keep the person company; talk, sing, read or pray together
- Listen to favourite songs and watch movies or sport together

Further information

If you have any further queries or require any additional support through this time, please feel free to speak to the nurse in charge of the ward/department.

If you require this information in another format, such as a different language, large print, braille or audio version please ask a member of staff or email interpreting.service@uhb.nhs.uk.

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