

Understanding Eating for Comfort

The changes people go through as their health declines can be hard to talk about. This handout is meant to be used to help start important conversations about eating and drinking between families and the healthcare team.

Why is this hard to talk about?

Eating is social, and can bring up pleasant and unpleasant emotions. Giving food and drink is a way of showing you care. When your loved one is eating less or can't eat, it can be very hard to accept.

Why isn't my loved one eating?

As people near the end of life, it's normal to eat and drink less. Eating can become hard work. The body becomes less able to use the energy and nutrients in food and drinks.

Eating may cause emotional stress and physical discomfort such as nausea or bloating. As people near the end of their life, they usually feel less thirsty and hungry and may begin to lose weight no matter how much they eat.

Families often wonder if having softer food textures or nutritional supplements such as Boost® or Ensure® will help. Texture changes or supplements may have benefit at different stages and in different ways. Dietitians and other healthcare providers can guide you.

How do I know my loved one doesn't want to eat or drink?

Listen and watch closely to what your loved one is telling you about eating and drinking. Respect what they tell you, with words or actions, or what they've said or written before. Body language and facial expression can be as powerful as words.

Here are some signs:

- Saying things like, "No. I just can't," or "I'm too tired. You have it."
- Making sounds or changing the tone of their voice.
- Repeating a sound with more urgency.
- Calling out or moaning as you offer food or drink.
- Turning their head away from the spoon or cup, closing lips, pushing food away, frowning, or clenching their hands.
- Closing their eyes or falling asleep.

Depression, medicine, constipation, and a dry mouth can affect the appetite. Swallowing problems are also more common as people age. Talk with your care team about options to deal with these concerns.

What is "eating for comfort"?

- Taking attention away from food and drink, knowing that food and drink may not make your loved one better.
- Offering food and drink without forcing or pressuring to eat.
- Getting pleasure from food and drink without worrying about what, how much, or how healthy the food may or may not be.
- Being flexible—what your loved one wants and how much they eat may change from day to day. If they show signs of discomfort, wait for another time to offer food or drink.
- Offering mouth care often. It gives comfort when a person isn't eating or drinking, even if they have no teeth.
- Encouraging loved ones to look for other ways to spend time together.

What can I do when my loved one won't eat or drink?

You can do a lot to show that you love and care, such as:

- Just being there for your loved one. You don't have to talk.
- Spending time together that isn't focused on food.
- Using gentle touch to give pleasure and comfort.
- Going out for a walk or activity if your loved one is able.
- Enjoying quiet activities such as playing music, reading out loud, or looking at pictures.
- Keeping the mouth moist helps your loved one feel comfortable.
 - Do mouth care often.
 - Offer sips of fluid or ice chips.
 - Talk to your care team about other ways you can help.

Remember, rejecting food doesn't mean the person is rejecting you or giving up. **Caring is the best nourishment.**

Have we done everything we can: What about tube feeding?

Many families wonder about different routes of giving food and fluids, such as tube feeding. This allows nutrition to be given through a tube. It may go through a hole in the stomach or go through the nose, down the throat and to the stomach.

Studies show that tube feeding may not make people more comfortable, live longer, or improve their quality of life.

Some people find it harder to do their everyday activities or to move about because of how and when the tube feed is given.

Complications such as bloating, reflux, diarrhea, aspiration, nausea, or infection can happen.

There may be reasons why tube feeds are used with certain people. Families should talk openly about tube feeding while their loved one can talk about their wishes. Try to honour your loved one's wishes. For more information, please speak with your care team.

For more information



- Talk to your healthcare team.
- Call Health Link at 811 and ask to talk to a dietitian or complete a [self-referral form](#) on ahs.ca/811.
- Visit ahs.ca/nutrition.

