

Eating and Drinking towards the End of Life



As a person approaches the end of their life, wishes and needs around eating and drinking change. Usually, a person doesn't feel hungry/thirsty at this stage and may not want to eat or drink. This is a natural part of the body slowing down.

The focus of any eating and drinking is for comfort and pleasure.

The person may want small tastes of favourite flavours. Loved ones will know best what they may enjoy. Offer the person whatever they would like to eat or drink, as long as it's not causing distress or discomfort. Soft, smooth food can be easiest, such as ice cream, yoghurt, or soup. Offer drinks in small sips from a cup, straw or teaspoon.

Advice for Supporting Eating and Drinking

- Aim for an upright posture if possible
- Make sure that the person is awake
- Allow plenty of time for each mouthful to be enjoyed and swallowed
- Watch for signs of refusal, such as turning their head away, or keeping their mouth closed
- Stop if you feel the person is refusing or distressed. You can offer again later.
- Never force food or drinks on someone who doesn't want to take them

Mouthcare

- Aim to keep the mouth clean and moist
- Try using artificial saliva gel/spray if the person's mouth is very dry
- Gently clean all around the mouth using a toothbrush with a soft, small head, if tolerated.
- Try a non-foaming toothpaste
- See if the person is more comfortable with or without dentures
- Monitor for signs of oral thrush
- If they want, loved ones can be involved in mouthcare

(Scottish Palliative Care Guidelines, 2020)

What changes to Eating and Drinking might there be?

- Changes to smell and taste
- Sore or dry mouth, or extra saliva
- Nausea
- Fatigue

It may be that the person has swallowing recommendations in place from the Speech and Language Therapist. These no longer need to be followed.