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Food For Thought



If Your Loved One Isn't Eating

Feeding the Dying

When the body is dying, all of the organs begin to shut down and they don't work as well as they used to. For instance, the heart, brain, liver, and kidneys (to name a few) are less able to do their jobs. The digestive system also stops working as well, and sometimes food cannot be digested at all. Your loved one may not want to eat. Food may cause your loved one to feel sick or to vomit. This is the body's way of saying that it no longer needs food.

It's A Natural Process

Not eating is a normal part of dying. Strange as it may sound, there are benefits to little or no food intake. This is nature's way of leading to a peaceful death.



There are Benefits to Not Eating

Eating and drinking less helps the body's tissues to become dryer and shrink. If your loved one has a tumor, this means that there may be less pressure on or from the tumor. The tumor itself may become smaller. Your loved one may not need as much pain medicine.

Swelling of the feet, legs, and other tissues may be reduced. If your loved one has fluid in his or her abdomen, this fluid may be reduced. This means that there will be less pressure on your loved one's organs. This may make it easier for your loved one to breathe.

Your loved one will not have to urinate (pee) as often. This means that your loved one won't use as much energy going to the bathroom. If your loved one has had problems with bladder control, urinating less often will increase his or her comfort.

There may be less fluid in your loved one's lungs and throat. This means that your loved one will not be as congested. It will also be easier for your loved one to breathe and swallow.

Your loved one will have less fluid in his or her stomach. This means that

your loved one won't feel as sick and won't vomit as often.

When a person isn't eating very much, a process called "ketone formation" happens. This is important because it can make your loved one feel euphoric (happy). This may help your loved one to feel less anxious about dying.



There Are Some Disadvantages Too

Your loved one will not be hungry very often, but they may be thirsty sometimes. If your loved one is thirsty, he or she can sip water or suck on ice chips or hard candy. The closer your loved one gets to death, the less thirsty he or she will be.

Keep your loved one's mouth moist and clean. This will increase his or her comfort.

Artificial feeding (tube feeding) can keep a person alive for a long time. But some studies have shown that this can cause complications that may shorten the lifespan.



Things To Consider

Is your loved one able to make his or her own decisions? If not, who is your loved one's Power of Attorney for Personal Care? Has your loved one expressed any wishes about feeding at the end of life?



What Are Your Feelings?

If your loved one isn't eating, you may be feeling a lot of different emotions. This is normal. We are used to thinking about food as a basic need of life. We view a good appetite as a sign of good health. Most of our social functions involve eating or drinking.

You may feel guilty and helpless because you are no longer able to feed your loved one. You may be afraid that others will think you don't care. You may not know what to do with your time if you are not feeding your loved one. If you try to feed your loved one and he or she does not want to eat, both

of you may feel frustrated. You may also be frustrated with staff if they are not able to feed your loved one. Seeing your loved one slipping away may leave you feeling hopeless and powerless. You may be afraid that your loved one will be abandoned.



What Can You Do?

There is no easy answer, but you may find these things helpful:

- Support your loved one's choice, no matter what it is. This will make both of you feel less frustrated.
- Discuss your feelings with others
- Make your time with your loved one special by talking, listening, holding hands, looking at photo albums, giving back rubs, playing cards, and sharing memories. This will make you feel close to your loved one and show him or her that you care.