

Diet and nutrition with advanced illness

Palliative and end-of-life care

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



As an illness progresses, the body becomes less able to absorb food, making it very important to listen to the patient's needs and preferences.

Here are some tips to help you make the best food choices for your loved one.



What you need to know

For loved ones

- Patients with an advanced illness tend to eat very little and may feel full after just a few bites.
- Don't push if they only want to eat small amounts or if they refuse food altogether.
- Don't force them to eat more; feeling overly full can lead to nausea and vomiting.
- Don't be surprised if their food preferences change from day to day; they may like something one day and refuse it the next.
- When planning meals, consider their tastes, as well as when and where they like to eat.
- Let them decide how much, what, and when they eat.
- Plan meals based on their appetite.
- Offer small, frequent meals, and make sure they chew their food well and eat slowly.
- Make meal times enjoyable.



For loved ones (cont.)

- Avoid focusing on their lack of appetite; instead, talk about happy memories or tell interesting stories.
- Create a calm and peaceful environment.
- Minimize cooking smells. Use the range hood, open a window, or keep them out of the kitchen while you're cooking.
- If needed, give them commercial (e.g., Ensure[®], Boost[®]) or homemade nutritional supplements between meals (see the brochure “Breuvages riches en calories et en protéines”).
- See the guide “Bien manger pour mieux vivre” from the Quebec Cancer Foundation and “Eating Well When You Have Cancer” from the Canadian Cancer Society.

Hydratation

- Offer small amounts of liquids frequently (small sips) to prevent dehydration.
- Give liquids one hour before or after meals instead of during meals.
- Make sure they always have a drink within reach.
- Choose cold, unsweetened or lightly sweetened drinks.
- Offer ice chips or make their favourite drinks into popsicles.
- Make sure they are seated comfortably when eating or drinking.





As the illness progresses

Forcing the patient to eat does more harm than good for their digestive system. Because of their weakened state, they may also struggle to swallow or digest food.

- Over time, they will eat less and may eventually stop eating. Thirst may be more related to a dry mouth than actual dehydration; small amounts of liquids and good oral hygiene can help.
- If they say they are hungry, give them whatever food they ask for and help feed them if they are too weak (respect their pace).
- Serve easy-to-swallow foods if they have difficulty swallowing (e.g., custard, pudding, gelatin-based desserts [Jell-O], milkshakes).
- Serve wet foods such as fruit sauce, or moisten muffins or cake with fruit sauce, milk or pudding.
- Watch out for choking hazards as the person becomes weaker.
- Do not feed them if they are drowsy or unconscious.

Tips to reduce food smells

- Ensure proper ventilation when cooking.
- Buy healthy frozen or prepared meals to minimize cooking.
- Limit strong-smelling foods (e.g., coffee, eggs, fish, fried foods, bacon, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, onions).
- Reheat food at a low temperature to reduce odours.
- Offer cold or room-temperature foods with little to no smell (e.g., sandwiches, salads, aspics, grains).
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Important

Let the nurse know if you notice:

- A significant decrease in appetite.
- Reduced urine output or darker, more concentrated urine.
- Dizziness.
- Choking while eating or drinking.
- Difficulty swallowing medication.



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