

## What about tube feeding?

Many caregivers wonder about tube feeding. Tube feeding is a way of getting the body the nutrition it needs. Liquid nutrients are given through a tube into the stomach.

Tube feeding is an option for some people but not everyone. Some people find it difficult because of how and when the tube feed is given. Bloating, reflux, diarrhea, aspiration, nausea, or infection can happen.

Talk with the care team to see if tube feeding is right for this person.

## What else can I do?

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

- Just be there. You don't have to talk.
- Spend time together that isn't focused on food.
- Use gentle touch to give pleasure and comfort.
- Go out for a walk or activity, if they are able.
- Enjoy quiet activities such as listening to music, reading out loud, or looking at pictures.
- Keep their mouth moist by doing mouth care often. The care team can show you how to care for their mouth.

Remember rejecting food doesn't mean the person is rejecting you or giving up.



# Let's Talk About Eating for Comfort As Health Declines

Supporting adults with developmental disabilities

Health Services for Community Living



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The changes people go through as their health declines can be hard to talk about. We hope this pamphlet helps start important conversations between families and the healthcare team about eating and drinking.

### **Why is this hard to talk about?**

Eating can bring up emotions. Giving food and drink is a way of showing you care. When people are eating less or can't eat, it can be very hard for caregivers to accept.

### **Why aren't they eating?**

As people get older, or as their health changes, it is normal to eat or drink less. Eating can become hard work. The way the body uses the energy and nutrients from food and drinks changes.

Eating might make the person feel sick to their stomach or bloated. As a person nears the end of their life, they usually feel less hungry and thirsty, and they can lose weight no matter how much they eat.

Caregivers often wonder if giving softer food textures or nutritional supplements will help. Texture changes or supplements might help. Dietitians and other health care providers can guide you.

### **How do I know when they can't or won't eat or drink?**

Listen to and watch what the person is telling you about eating and drinking.

Here are some signs they can't or won't eat or drink:

- Say "No".
- Make sounds, repeat a sound with urgency, or change the tone of sounds as you offer food or drink.
- Turn their head away from the spoon, close their lips, push food away, frown, or clench their hands.
- Close their eyes or fall asleep.
- Cough, choke, or make gurgling sounds when they eat or drink.

Respect what they tell you, with words or actions. Respect what they have said or written in the past about their wishes for care at the end of their life. Body language and facial expression can be as powerful as words.

Things that can change a person's appetite:

- depression
- a dry mouth
- problems swallowing
- medicines
- constipation

Talk with the care team about ways to deal with these concerns.

### **How to 'eat for comfort'?**

- ✓ Don't focus on the person needing to eat and drink. Food and drink might not make them better.
- ✓ Offer food and drink without force or pressure.
- ✓ Offer the person food and drink that gives them pleasure and when they feel like eating. Don't worry about what, how much, or how healthy the food might be.
- ✓ Be flexible. What they want and how much they eat could change from day to day. If they show signs they can't or won't eat, wait for another time to offer food or drink.
- ✓ Look for other ways to spend time together.

Swallowing can become a problem for some people. If forced, food or drink can spill into the windpipe by accident. If this happens, the person could get a chest infection, making it hard to breathe.

**Caring is  
the best nourishment!**