



ACT Palliative Care
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Australian Government

Department of Health and Ageing

Introduction

Loss of appetite is a common problem for people living with a life limiting illness. It often worries carers perhaps even more than it worries the person who loses their appetite. Loss of appetite can be caused by one or more reversible factors, including nausea, alterations in taste, constipation, depression, some medications, and/or irritation of the mouth and throat. Generally speaking, these problems can be overcome. However there is a group of 'whole-body effects' that stem from progressive illnesses (particularly of cancers) that lead to noticeable weight loss and reductions in appetite, energy and activity levels. It is important to understand that these effects are not driven by the choices or by the attitudes of the person with the illness, but by the illness itself.

Tumours caused by cancer can trigger the over-production of certain naturally occurring chemicals. These chemicals can build up in the body and bring about metabolic changes that result in a range of related problems including:

- a near-complete loss of appetite,
- a significant reduction in energy levels and stamina, and
- an irreversible loss of body weight.

Although this collection of problems is well understood, there is to date, little that can be done to overcome it. Encouraging people in these circumstances to eat and drink more, is not particularly helpful as it will not result in an increase in body weight, and can often become a source of stress and frustration in itself. Cooking meals, and eating and drinking together are all important parts of caring for those we love, and is a central part of the shared lives of families and friends. It can be very difficult to see these efforts to care and nurture someone rejected or declined.

How to care for someone with a poor appetite

Try to find ways to tempt the appetite of the person you are caring for.

- Offer small portions frequently through the day rather than 3 large meals. Large amounts of food can be overwhelming and further suppress any appetite.
- Don't worry too much about achieving a balanced diet. Focus on what they like to eat, rather than what is 'good for them'. Remember, it is never too early in the day for dessert, or too late in the day for breakfast.
- Alterations in taste, a tendency to nausea, or mouth discomfort may change food preferences. Favourite foods may now taste too sweet or too sour, too strong or too bland. You may need to make some adjustments to take this into account.
- Try new foods or reach back into the past for foods with a nostalgic connection to childhood or adolescence.
- Throughout the day offer small amounts of different types of fruit juice and milk-based drinks, as well as soft drinks and alcoholic beverages.
- Experiment with different temperatures and textures (by diluting drinks or bulking up drinks with ice-cream, custard, yoghurt or nutritional supplements).

Managing the eating environment

- Introduce fresh air, pleasant surroundings and compatible companions.
- Eliminate unpleasant and cooking smells.
- Use perfumed cleaners and air fresheners, but ensure that these are not overwhelming. Avoid strongly perfumed flowers.

Encouraging freshness and oral health

- Rinse the mouth or clean the teeth and dentures with water frequently.
- Freshen the face and hands with a washcloth before meals.
- For someone who has a dry mouth, increased saliva production can be promoted using chewing gum, wedges of pineapple or pineapple juice, ice chips, cotton bud moisturisers and/or over-the-counter artificial saliva products from the chemist.

Remember that, in advancing stages of life limiting illness, there is no harm in people going without food. People with advanced life limiting illness can go without food for many days or a few weeks without problem, and remain comfortable with only the benefit of fluids for sustenance. Even though fluids are important to prevent dehydration and to keep the kidneys flushed, the intake of fluids will drop away during the last stage of illness. This is part of the natural 'winding down' process. Discuss any concerns you may have about this with the nurse or doctor in your care team. The team may seek advice and input from a dietitian, if this is thought to be beneficial. In certain circumstances there are medications that can be used to stimulate appetite, but the results are variable and cannot be relied on indefinitely to reverse the problem. Again, discuss this with the nurse or doctor in your care team.

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