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Tagline

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Caregivers Face Difficult Decisions About Feeding Options at the End of Life

In many cultures, food is an important part of our interactions with friends and family. We find comfort in sharing meals with the people we care about, whether we're feeding children or hosting big holiday dinners. So when our dying loved ones are no longer able to eat on their own, we may find ourselves facing difficult decisions about what to do next.

Recent news has prompted discussions about when medical interventions should be used to give patients food and water. Since the beginning of its widespread use in the 1980s, artificial nutrition — most commonly in the form of feeding tubes — has sparked debate. Many people wonder if the use of artificial nutrition is appropriate or necessary in every situation.

Feeding tubes and IV hydration are generally used for patients who will likely recover from their illness, like those going through harsh medical treatments or stroke therapies. These medical interventions help patients get the nutrients they need until their bodies heal. They may also be used for a patient with a long-term disability who otherwise has a good quality of life.



It is a different situation, however, when a patient is in the final stage of life and can no longer swallow or does not want to eat. As the body gets closer to the end of life, organs are unable to process food and liquid like they could before. Feeding tubes and IVs can put strain on the patient's body and lead to ulcers, bloating, or discomfort.

Instead of making feeding tubes the default option in end-of-life situations where eating becomes difficult, hospice care professionals suggest that families and caregivers rely on careful hand feeding instead. This method reduces the risk of aspiration (pulling food into the lungs instead of the stomach) that is present even with tube feeding. Careful hand feeding also allows the patient to feel the connections with friends and family that we gain from sharing meals. Tube feeding often leaves them more isolated and lacking important human contact in the final days.

Careful hand feeding also allows a patient to let caregivers know when food and drink are no longer wanted. Although it may be distressing for caregivers, it is a natural and painless part of the dying process for a patient to stop desiring food or drink.

Decisions about artificial nutrition can be difficult at any time, but hospice can help. For more information about end-of-life care options, call to speak with us directly.

How Hospice Can Help You

Hospice team members are experts in end-of-life care and pain management. If you or your loved one is facing the decision over whether or not to use a feeding tube or other artificial nutrition, the hospice team can help you through this difficult time.

At the end of life, feeding tubes can often cause unnecessary discomfort during the dying process, and may lead to other complications. If you choose to withhold these measures, the experts at hospice will make sure that the patient is comfortable and pain free in his or her final days, and that grief support is available for caregivers. Hospice is here for you and your loved ones every step of the journey.

End-of-Life Care News Briefs for Patients and Families

Medicare Benefit Covers Costs of Hospice

Because some patients and families are worried about costs of end-of-life care, they do not enroll in hospice care until very late in the dying process. This can keep patients at the end of life from having all the comfort and benefits that hospice care provides.

A recent article released by the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO) stresses to patients and families that all people who are Medicare eligible and who are terminally ill have their hospice costs covered by the Medicare Hospice Benefit.

“The Medicare Hospice Benefit is an all inclusive benefit that covers the costs of hospice care,” states the NHPCO.

“Additionally, the Medicaid Hospice Benefit and most private health insurance plans and HMOs provide coverage.”

Among other services, the Medicare Hospice Benefit completely covers the cost of:

- Doctor services
- Nursing care
- Medical equipment and supplies
- Home health aides and home care services
- Physical therapy
- Dietary counseling
- Short-term respite or inpatient care
- Social work services

Additionally, Medicare also covers support services for families by trained hospice volunteers. This includes grief support, an area of end-of-life care that is essential for bereaved families and loved ones.

The hope is that no patient or family will hesitate to use hospice care because of concerns over cost. “The benefit covers virtually all aspects of hospice care with little out-of-pocket expense to the patient or family,” the NHPCO assures.

“For 30 years the Medicare Hospice Benefit has provided a model for financing end-of-life care that can bring great relief and support to families during one of life’s most difficult times.”

User-Friendly Tool Helps Patients Plan for End of Life

People nearing the end of life often have trouble with all the important decisions that need to be made. They may wonder where to start, what questions to ask, and who to ask for help.

With this in mind, doctors at the University of California have recently launched a new website for what they call the PREPARE program.

“The PREPARE website is designed to help people and their loved ones prepare for medical decision making,” the authors explain. Each section of the website has audio, large print, and video closed captioning options to give each patient best access to the information.

With interactive checklists, simple explanations, and helpful videos, the website teaches patients how to:

1. Ask someone to be their medical decision maker

2. Decide what matters most in life
3. Discuss flexibility for what the decision maker is allowed to do
4. Tell others about their wishes
5. Ask doctors the right questions in order to make good medical decisions

After moving through each step of the website, the final stage in the PREPARE program is to help each patient make an action plan for his or her situation. The website encourages the patient to choose one uncompleted step and set a goal for when to have it finished.

By making these decisions now, patients are more prepared for future decisions about their end-of-life care. This also helps relieve the burden on loved ones who may otherwise have to make hard decisions without knowing what the patient wants.

For more information, visit www.prepareforyourcare.org or speak with hospice.

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Hospice Name

Street

City, State, ZIP

Phone

www.website.com