Riverside Health

Artificial Nutrition and Hydration

The decision about artificial feeding and hydration at the end of life is difficult. These treatments can be beneficial for those recovering from an illness or injury, but for individuals who are facing the end of life, there are both benefits and risks that should be discussed with a provider.

What is artificial nutrition and hydration?

Providers insert tubes into the veins (IVs) or the stomach to get fluids or a nutritional substance into the body. When a long-term feeding tube is used, a surgeon permanently places a tube into the stomach. Short-term nutrition can be provided with a tube inserted through the nose and down to the stomach.

What can it do?

At the end of life, artificial nutrition and hydration will not change the outcome but may prolong life for a short time. For individuals who are in a persistent vegetative state without awareness of themselves or others, these procedures can sustain life indefinitely.

Artificial nutrition and hydration do not satisfy hunger or thirst in the way that we normally think of eating and drinking. Many people at the end of life are no longer hungry or thirsty and may begin to refuse food as they enter the last phases of their illness.

What are the risks?

In some cases, the fluids that are put into the body can increase pain and discomfort. This is true in people whose organs are "shutting down" as part of the dying process and when fluids increase pressure on tumors, causing pain, or on the lungs, causing shortness of breath. There can be a risk of fluids spilling over into the lungs, increasing the risk of pneumonia.

How can I decide?

If you or your loved one has a life-limiting illness, talk to your provider about the benefits and risks of artificial nutrition and hydration. If you do not have an illness, think about whether you would want to be kept alive with these treatments after a sudden illness or injury resulting in a permanent loss of awareness of yourself or your surroundings.

When someone has a terminal illness, death is not caused by withholding these treatments but by the underlying illness itself. Some people choose not to have these treatments, some choose to try them to see if they help and some want to use them on a long-term basis. The choice is yours. Write your wishes on an advance directive and choose a health care agent who understands your choices and is willing to honor them. Most importantly, talk about it with the people who are closest to you.

How do I communicate my choices?

Help your medical care providers honor your choices by discussing this information with your provider. For guidance on writing an advance directive or creating other documents to communicate your choices, contact your provider or Riverside Care Navigation at 757-856-7030.