

# Best Practice Recommendations for Weight Loss at the End of Life

A significant number of people living in nursing homes who experience unintended weight loss have terminal illnesses or irreversible conditions such as late-stage dementia. If the person has a progressive and irreversible illness, (e.g., cancer, congestive heart failure, AIDS, or other conditions that are both irreversible and progressive) the person and family may engage in advance care planning.

## Palliative Nutrition Therapy

Factors for determining the course of nutrition therapy at the end of life include:

- The person's desire for extent of medical care
- The decision to forego hydration or nutrition may be difficult to reverse within a period of days or weeks
- The expected benefits and potential burdens of non-oral feeding must be evaluated
- Artificial nutrition and hydration are medical interventions
- Consider whether nutrition will improve the quality of life during the final stages of life
- Consider whether nutrient support is expected to provide the person with emotional comfort, decreased anxiety, improved self esteem, or relief from abandonment

Palliative care is the total care of a person with a terminal disease when cure is no longer the goal. The focus of palliative nutrition therapy is on quality of life and relief of symptoms. Palliative nutrition requires a specific and explicit plan designed with person/family involvement. For people with late-stage or terminal illness, the optimal goal may simply be to satisfy the senses of taste and smell and to provide the social benefits of mealtime in order to maximize the person's comfort. When maintaining weight or nutritional status is no longer the goal, consider a goal that weight loss and dehydration are expected outcomes at the end of life.

## Interventions for Palliative Nutrition Therapy

- Provide favorite foods
- Discontinue therapeutic diets, unless controlling symptoms
- Small frequent meals are better tolerated
- Monitor food preferences frequently
- Do not push food.



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- Fluids to alleviate constipation and drug toxicity
- Ice chips, mouth swabs, lubricating lips
- Let person be in control

In the hours before death, dehydration acts as a natural anesthetic which increases comfort and decreases anxiety.

## Resources

- [Palliative Plan of Care Form](#)
- [Care Plan for End of Life](#)