

*“ The energy required to
take in, process, and
eliminate food may be
more than the body can
handle.”*

***We would like to
answer any questions
regarding this or other
hospice related issues.
Please feel free to
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A Look at
**Appetite
Loss**
and
**Terminal
Illness**

Loss of appetite is common with many life-limiting illnesses. Typically, this loss of appetite can result in progressive weight loss as well.

Whenever appetite loss occurs, it is normal for a family to feel sadness, concern and discouragement. Food is such an important part of our lives, and proper nutrition has long been associated with being healthy. It is no wonder, then, that we try to emphasize good nutrition when we are sick. Even with terminal illnesses, one may believe that good nutrition can only help improve quality of health and overall being. Questions may arise, such as...

- *Is this normal?*
- *Can it be helped with medication?*
- *Is it uncomfortable?*
- *Am I doing something wrong?*

Let's address these questions together...

At times, emotional or psychological factors may inhibit appetite. Other causes, such as uncontrolled pain or nausea, can affect appetite. Even medication side effects can decrease appetite. However, while upsetting for the family to witness, loss of appetite and loss of body weight are very often a natural progression of the illness itself.

The hospice team plays an important role in assessing and suggesting interventions for loss of appetite. Determining the likely cause or causes is an essential first step to planning appropriate interventions. Some causes are reversible and both pharmacologic and non-pharmacologic interventions may be initiated.

At times, however, there is no medical intervention for loss of appetite. Appetite loss is actually nature's way of regulating a changing digestive system in the final stages of illness. Although it may seem strange, at this time, rather than providing benefit, too much food may actually cause distress and discomfort.

- *As the illness progresses, there is a slowing of the digestive system as activity is decreased and the circulatory system refocuses on essential systems.*
- *The body has a lower level of nutritional requirement due to decreased activity.*
- *The energy required to take in, process, and eliminate food may be more than the body can handle.*
- *Loss of appetite can be the body's way of regulating intake so that the digestive system is not overloaded. Excess food may cause more harm than good.*
- *When the body is not digesting food, it releases natural chemicals to curb hunger pain.*
- *Food that the body cannot process may cause cramping, nausea, bloating, and other serious problems including aspiration pneumonia.*
- *Recent studies have shown that tube feedings do not improve quality of life or affect longevity of life. In fact, artificial feedings may cause medical complications*