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***We would like to
answer any questions
regarding this or other
hospice related issues.
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A Look at Dehydration and Terminal Illness

Dehydration, or a decrease in body fluids, is common with many life-limiting illnesses. Many patients and their families are concerned when this decrease in fluid intake occurs.

When dehydration develops, it is normal for a patient and family to feel sadness, concern, and discouragement. Especially in the summer months, we often hear how important fluids are to prevent medical complications, it is no wonder, then that we try to emphasize proper fluid intake when we are sick. With terminal illness, one may believe that adequate fluid intake can only help improve quality of health and overall being...but is this true?

Questions regarding dehydration 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...

Dehydration in relation to terminal illness can have many causes. In some cases, these factors may be reversible. In many cases, however, dehydration is a result of natural factors associated with end stage terminal illness.

In some patients, during the early stages of their disease, appetite loss or medication effects may contribute to fluid loss, and these factors may initially be reversible. However, in later stages of the illness, patients may experience dehydration caused by factors that are not reversible.

At the end of life, the body uses decreased thirst to regulate intake of fluids in order to make the workload easier for the circulatory systems, which has the task of keeping fluids moving in the body. If the heart and circulatory system become overwhelmed, the result is pooling of fluids or swelling, often in feet ankles, sometimes in the lungs.

Most people are surprised to learn the natural process of dehydration at the end of life produces many positive effects and few, if any, negative ones. One unique benefit is the body's release of endorphins (chemicals in the body) that promote comfort and restfulness.

- ***Dehydration may contribute to decreased mental status, increased sleepiness, and decreased urine output. However, these changes can be common with or without dehydration.***
- ***Dehydration is not painful; many patients do not even experience thirst.***
- ***As the body dehydrates, chemicals are released that promote comfort.***
- ***As illness progresses, there is a slowing of the body systems. Dehydration can be nature's way of regulating fluids so that the circulatory system is not overloaded.***
- ***At this point, IV fluids have not been shown to improve quality or longevity of life. Instead, excess fluids can cause swelling, pain, difficulty breathing and congestive heart failure. These complications may even shorten life expectancy.***