



**St Joseph's  
Hospice**  
Serving East London  
and the City

# Fluids in the last days of life



## Fluids in the last days of life

Everyone is different, so it is not always possible to say exactly what will happen when someone is near the end of their life. But in the last weeks and days before death, it is common to experience certain changes.

The body may slow down and your loved one may spend more time sleeping. Not wanting to eat or drink is also something that is often seen.

This leaflet hopes to give you some more information about fluids and drips in the last days of life. It tries to answer the questions that you may want to ask, and hopefully it will encourage you to ask for further information.

### Do you use drips?

We may use drips if we think it will help. If a drip is used, a small plastic tube is put under the skin to give fluid. If a drip is started, its use will be reviewed frequently to see if it is helping and to make sure there are no side effects.

Your loved one will need less fluid now than when they were well. As the process of dying continues, drips do not always help and can cause problems.

Fluid from a drip may build up in the lungs making breathing more difficult. It may also collect under the skin in

the legs or arms. This is why it needs monitoring closely.

The doctors and nurses will assess each person and weigh up the benefits and burdens of using a drip. If it is causing problems they may advise that it is stopped.

### If someone can't drink won't they die from dehydration?

It is normal for a person who is seriously ill not to feel like eating or drinking. When a person is dying, the body starts to shut down and the organs work less well. Swallowing may become difficult. Your loved one may lose their appetite and stop eating and drinking. This can be upsetting because it is our natural instinct to provide food and drink as a way of looking after those we care for.

However, as the body weakens there is less and less need for fluids.

### Won't they be thirsty if they can't drink?

For most people in the last days of life, thirst is not a problem. A loss of appetite and thirst is nature's way of helping the body prepare for a peaceful death. It is important to remember that it is the illness that causes the body to fail, and not the lack of fluids.

Eating and drinking also becomes more of an effort when someone is very ill, and it is normal for your loved one to only want sips of drink at a time.

If your loved one is thirsty, we will always encourage drinking if it is safe. Often, people experience a dry mouth rather than thirst. Good mouth care is important here.

### What can I do to help?

You can carry on offering drinks unless staff say it is not safe. The team may provide aids to help with this and to make sure the drinks do not cause coughing or spluttering.

It is sometimes easier to suck, so some people like to have their favourite drink frozen as an ice lolly and others like to suck on crushed ice.

If sips of liquid are not wanted, you can use a small sponge soaked in cold water or their favourite drink to help moisten their lips and tongue, or an infant's soft toothbrush to provide comfort. A staff member can show you how to use these if appropriate.

There are also special saliva sprays and gels that may be used. Good mouth care is the most important thing for providing comfort.

# About St Joseph's Hospice

St Joseph's Hospice provides care 24 hours a day 7 days a week to local people affected by life-limiting illnesses. As a registered charity, we rely on the financial support of our community to keep providing world class care free of charge to individuals and their families.

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