End of Life Eating Habits

When your loved one approaches the end of their life, their appetite may decrease or even go away entirely. As a caregiver, friend, or family member, you may be surprised or concerned when your loved one’s end of life eating habits change. Many people often find this and other parts of hospice care difficult to understand and accept.

You may worry that your loved one isn’t eating enough or needs to eat more to keep their strength up. But at the end of someone’s life, their eating habits and nutritional needs change, and loss of appetite is normal.

Here are three things to keep in mind when your loved one’s eating habits change as they near the end of their life.

Loss of appetite is natural and expected.

In the days and even weeks before death, the body slowly shuts down. During this time, your loved one will gradually lose interest in food.

This is not starvation. Starvation happens when a healthy person does not get enough food, and they feel intense hunger. When someone is dying, the body can no longer absorb or make use of food. Feelings of hunger and thirst go away. Your loved one will eat less and may prefer softer foods and liquids before their appetite disappears.

Dehydration may bring relief.

There is clear medical evidence that during the last phase of a terminal illness, dehydration can bring comfort to your loved one. When they stop drinking, they may also stop
vomiting, and they may have less pain from any tumors they have. Coughing, congestion, and mucus in the lungs may also decrease.

You can support your loved one’s changing eating habits.

As your loved one nears the end of their life, you may feel like there’s nothing you can do. While their eating pattern changes, you can still provide them support and comfort.

Some things you can do to help your loved one are:

- Allow your loved one to choose the foods that they find most appealing.
- Do not force your loved one to eat or point out to them that they are eating less.
- Make mealtime a quiet and pleasant time (with candles, flowers, or soft music).
- Make the most of breakfast — appetites tend to be higher at the start of the day.
- Offer favorite foods in small amounts or liquid nutritional supplements.
- Have drinks available and consider softer foods, such as Jell-O, pudding, and ice cream.
- Allow your loved one to rest after meals.
- Practice good mouth care and offer ice chips and sips of water for dry mouth.
- Prepare yourself emotionally for this natural transition.

People who stop eating and drinking will eventually fall into a deep sleep and usually die in 1 to 3 weeks. While these changes can cause you to worry, they are a natural part of someone reaching the end of their life. With your help, you can make this transition more comfortable for your loved one.