

## Useful Websites

University Health Network website  
[www.uhn.ca](http://www.uhn.ca)  
Search topics in 'Patients and Families'

Victoria Hospice Website  
<https://victoriahospice.org>  
Useful information about a variety of topics in palliative and end of life care



We would like to acknowledge that the original pamphlet was created by the Pain and Symptom Management Team.

## St. Joseph's Care Group

*Corporate Office*  
St. Joseph's Hospital  
35 Algoma St. N.  
Thunder Bay, ON P7B 5G7  
(807) 343-2431

[www.sjcg.net](http://www.sjcg.net)  
[communications@tbh.net](mailto:communications@tbh.net)

### Mission

St. Joseph's Care Group is a Catholic organization that identifies and responds to the unmet needs of the people of Northwestern Ontario, as a way of continuing the healing mission of Jesus in the tradition of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Sault Ste. Marie.

### Vision

A leader in client-centred care.

### Core Values

*Care*  
**Compassion**  
*Commitment*

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## St. Joseph's Hospice Palliative Care Program

4<sup>th</sup> Floor North  
35 N. Algoma Street  
Thunder Bay, Ontario  
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## When Your Loved One is not Eating



## Important Considerations for Palliative and End of Life Nutrition

*Care*  
**Compassion**  
*Commitment*

## **When your family member is not eating**

Through the process of dying, all of the organs and functions begin to shut down, including the digestive system. The sensation of hunger diminishes. The heart, kidneys, liver and other systems decrease in their function and nutrition is no longer a priority.

## **What happens to the digestive system?**

Slowly, the digestive system stops working. The person will lose their appetite. They may experience nausea and/or vomiting.

## **What happens to the ability to swallow?**

As the person progresses in their illness, their ability to send the message from their brain to their throat to swallow is reduced. Their ability to swallow can also be affected by how awake someone is. At times, the difficulties with swallowing can result in coughing. It can also result in aspiration, which is the item they are trying to swallow goes in their airway instead of into their digestive system. Aspiration can be a medical emergency.

## **Are these changes normal?**

Yes. Not eating is a normal part of dying. Sometimes people are not awake enough to eat or drink. Other people have symptoms that are brought on by eating (ie. Nausea, pain, vomiting). Most people are not eating or drinking in the time leading up to their death.

People rarely experience hunger, but thirst may occur initially. Offering sips of water or ice chips when the person is awake enough to manage them will help with comfort.

## **Important to consider**

It is important to follow the wishes of your family member.

- Are they still able to make their own decisions? If so, we would ask them what their wishes are.
- If they are not awake or able to make their decisions, we would ask their Power of Attorney for Personal Care or Substitute Decision Maker.

Safety and comfort are paramount in deciding to feed your family member. Causing undue pain or suffering may be a reason to not feed your family member.

## **What are your feelings?**

You are likely very tired and overwhelmed by all that has been happening. Emotions are heightened when people are in this state.

Society equates food with love. A good appetite is seen as a sign of good health. Most of our social activities focus on eating and drinking. These types of ideas make it difficult to face your loved one not eating.

It is common for family to feel guilty or helpless when they cannot feed their loved one. You may feel others do not understand and judge you. You may argue with your family member about eating and be frustrated with how much they aren't eating. These are all common experiences.

## **Is there anything I can do?**

You may feel like you are helpless and losing your sense of hope. While there are not any easy answers, it is important to:

- Support your family member's decisions (no matter what it is)
- Follow their expressed wishes
- Discuss your feelings with others (Social Work, Nurse, Doctor, friends or family)
- Spend meaningful time with your family member (reminiscing, looking at photos, doing things together that you both enjoy)