

YOUR HEALTH

FLUIDS & DRIPS



This help sheet answers some frequently asked questions about fluids and the use of artificial hydration (fluid intake given by a drip) in advanced illness. It is aimed mainly at carers, but some patients may also find this information helpful.

If someone doesn't drink, won't they die of dehydration? Isn't fluid even more important than food?

It is normal for people who are dying from advanced cancer and other illnesses to eventually stop drinking and to stop feeling thirsty. As the body weakens and the systems start to work less well, there is less and less need for fluid.

It is important to remember that it is the illness that is making the body's systems fail, not a lack of fluid. If someone is very weak and is given fluid by mouth it may go down the 'wrong way' and make them cough and splutter.

What can I do if they complain that they have a dry mouth?

A dry mouth can be a very common problem at any stage of the illness. Ask the medical or nursing staff about it. This feeling is quite different from feeling thirsty. Medicines such as special saliva sprays, gels and chewing gum may be helpful.

What can I do to help?

If staff feel it is safe to do so, you can carry on offering drinks (as the staff will do when you are not there) but don't be surprised if your loved one only wants a few sips at a time. The staff will help you to make sure that the drinks are not causing coughing or spluttering. Some people like to have their favourite drink frozen as an ice-lolly or ice chips - this can be easier to suck on than trying to drink.

Do you ever use drips?

Yes. A drip is the name for fluid, which is usually sterile salt water, given to the patient through a tube that goes in either under the skin or through a vein.

Sometimes the doctors and nurses may feel that giving a drip might help. If a drip is started, it will be reviewed by staff over the next 24 to 48 hours to see if it is helping and also to make sure there are no side effects from it.

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However, for most people with only hours or days to live, their body's systems are shutting down and thirst is not a problem. Drips often do not help and good mouth care is the most important comfort measure.

Can you give drips at home if they might help?

For most people, this is not necessary. It is not usually safe to do so at home.

Are there any disadvantages to drips?

Yes. In the last few hours or days of life the body cannot handle fluid as efficiently as before - giving drips can sometimes make things worse by overloading the delicate fluid balancing mechanisms of the body. If this happens the person may experience 'chestiness' or noisy breathing, and swelling of the arms or legs, as their body cannot process the fluid from the drip.

Once a decision about a drip has been made is it final?

No. The doctors and nurses will always monitor the situation and discuss it on a regular basis. The patient always has the right to say that they want to have a drip removed. If the patient is too ill to make that decision, the doctors and nurses will make a careful assessment and have a discussion with the patient's family about the right thing to do.

The ultimate responsibility for decisions about starting and stopping a drip rests with the senior doctor caring for the patient. Any decision that is made can always be reviewed.