

Why won't they eat?

This leaflet aims to answer frequently asked questions about appetite and weight loss when the person you are caring for is very ill. It accompanies 'Fluids & drips' and is aimed mainly at carers. However, some patients may also find this information helpful.

Why have they stopped eating? I keep cooking tempting dishes and they just push them away.

Many people with serious illnesses lose their appetite as they become less well.

Sometimes there is an obvious cause like feeling sick or having a sore mouth which medication can help. However, very often the illness itself causes the loss of appetite.

It can feel very hurtful when the person you are caring for pushes food away, especially when you have taken trouble to make something they like, but it is important to remember that it is not meant to upset you. They just don't feel like eating, and often feel bad about that themselves.

It may help to talk to the nurse or doctor about how it makes you both feel.

Why does this happen?

Many cancers and other advanced illnesses make the body produce chemicals which break down muscle and fat faster than it should.

These chemicals also 'trick' the part of the brain that controls appetite into thinking that the person is full after only a few mouthfuls or even after no food at all. These chemical

changes will only go away if the underlying illness is successfully treated.

But won't they starve to death if they don't eat?

The answer is no. Changes that occur in the human body during severe illnesses such as advanced cancer or heart failure are completely different from those that happen in healthy people who have been forced to go short of food.

In advanced illness, people can start to lose weight even when their appetite is still fairly normal because the body is no longer able to use the food it is given to build itself up. This is why the appetite gets smaller – the body seems to recognise that it can no longer cope with food.

Surprisingly, people with advanced illness often live for some time after they have stopped eating completely, although it is often one of the signs that the person is becoming less well.

Are there alternative feeding methods? What about 'drip' or 'tube' feeding?

We know from research that neither drip nor tube feeding will make most people with advanced cancer put on weight or live any longer.

Feeding via a tube through the nose into the stomach (nasogastric tube) or directly through a hole into the stomach (gastrostomy) is provided for some people who have an appetite but are not able to eat properly, but this is only done in certain specific circumstances.

