

Dehydration at the end of life



What is dehydration?

Dehydration occurs when the body loses or uses more fluids than it is taking in. For healthy persons, dehydration should be prevented as it leads to chemical imbalances, headaches, muscle cramps, nausea/vomiting, and dizziness.

However, as death approaches, dehydration is a natural occurrence due to inadequate oral intake, bowel and urine losses, and losses from skin (sweat) and the lungs (through breathing). Increased drowsiness and dry mouth are typical results of dehydration in the dying, but headache, nausea, vomiting, and cramps rarely occur.

Benefits of Dehydration

Dehydration can actually be beneficial to the dying.

- When intake is decreased, chemical changes occur in the brain produce a substance that has anesthetic properties which provides a heightened state of well-being.
- Less fluid intake results in less urine production. This reduces the need for an indwelling catheter or the frequent use of a urinal/bedpan or changing of linens.
- Dehydration relieves congestion in the lungs which makes breathing easier.
- When tumors are present, dehydration decreases fluid around tumors, resulting in less pressure and pain

Risks of Artificial Hydration

For healthy persons, artificial hydration (IV fluids) is a common quick way to reverse dehydration. However, in the dying, artificial hydration has several dangers.

- Bloating: as the gut slows down, it cannot process the excess fluids, leading to stomach swelling, nausea, and vomiting
- Swelling: as kidney function decreases and blood pressure lowers, fluid begins to pool in the arms and legs, causing uncomfortable swelling. This excess swelling may contribute to the development of bed sores
- Shortness of breath: when the body no longer can appropriately process fluids, extra fluid “backs up” into the lungs, causing difficulty breathing

Management

- Offer favorite liquids: coffee, sodas, juices (even beer or wine is ok!)
- If no longer able to drink, swab the mouth with their favorite drinks so they can taste their favorite flavors
- Provide good oral care: brushing teeth or swabbing the mouth with a toothette soaked in water or diluted non-alcohol mouthwash every 2 hours will keep their mouth “comfortable”
- Apply lip moisturizer frequently (do not use petroleum-based products if oxygen is in use)
- Never force eating or drinking: support their body’s decision to refuse food and/or fluids

If you need help with your symptoms, call VNA 24hrs a day:

214-689-0000