

# Tube Feeding

This fact sheet will help you decide if a feeding tube is right for you. The best time to make these decisions is when you are feeling well. You should discuss the side effects and advantages with your health care providers and family.

## Tube Feeding (Fluids and Food)

Health problems may make it so you can not swallow normally or can't take in enough food or water by mouth. When this occurs, we give patients a feeding tube so they can have food or water.

## What is a tube feeding?

Tube feeding can be done by placing a tube in your nose and into your stomach or by putting a tube through your skin and into your stomach. To insert the tube through the skin into the stomach is a surgical procedure. Once tube is in place, food and water can be slowly pumped into your stomach. If you will need a tube for a long period of time, surgical placement is best.

## When are feeding tubes beneficial?

Tube feedings work best when they are used for a short time to help you recovery from a surgery or a sudden illness. Some patients who suffer a stroke cannot swallow at first and a tube is inserted to give them food and water. Often these patients can learn to eat again, and the tube is eventually removed. A patient with throat cancer might not be able to swallow as a result of successful treatment of their cancer. They may have a feeding tube and still carry on other normal activities.

## When do tube feedings not work?

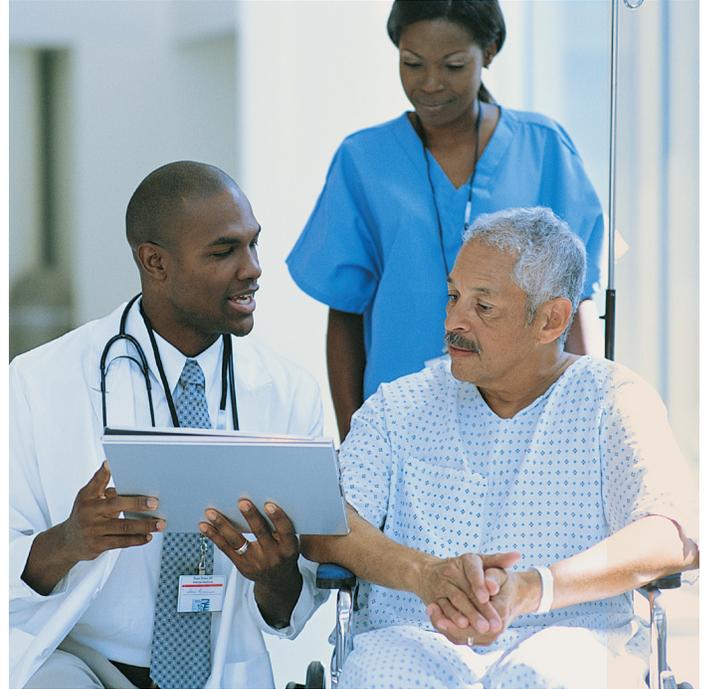
Tube feedings do not work well when you have a disease that can no longer be treated or if your body is weak from chronic health problems.

## What are the side effects of tube feedings?

- Food can spill into the lungs and cause an infection
- Some patients will develop diarrhea
- If your organs are not working well, your body may not be able to digest the food
- Fluid can build up in your lungs, stomach, hands and feet making you feel uncomfortable

## Potential benefits of not using tube feedings and IV's:

- Less fluid in the lungs making it easier to breathe
- Less fluid in the throat so that there is less choking and need for suction
- Less pressure on tumors leading to less pain
- Less frequent urination leading to less frequent need to change sheets, and less risk for skin breakdown or bed sores
- Increased in the body's natural pain-relieving hormones- less pain and increased comfort.



There is no medical or clinical evidence that not putting a feeding tube or IV leads to a more a painful death. In fact, the research says just the opposite. Not giving tube feedings is not causing the patient to “starve to death.” The main problem with not drinking at the end of life is a dry mouth. Very few people feel any thirst. Dry mouth can be easily treated with good mouth care, ice chips or a moistened sponge swab.

### **Why is it sometimes so hard to let a patient go without eating?**

Culturally offering food is a sign of caring and hospitality. For many of us eating is a social event and something we enjoy. It is hard when someone we love is unable to eat and drink naturally. We may feel compelled to “feed” them in some way.

But, as death approaches, you will not “keep up your strength” by forcing yourself to eat when it makes you uncomfortable. For many people, providing food is a way of expressing caring and love. When someone loses their appetite, it is distressing to that person and their loved ones. You could try eating small amounts of special foods. However, it is natural for you to have a decrease in appetite as illness progresses.

Forcing food or liquids usually does not help and may hurt, especially if they require restraints, IVs, or hospitalization. The truth is, for those who are dying, the times come when it might be more compassionate, caring, even natural, to allow a natural dehydration to occur. Forcing feeding tubes and IVs on dying patients can make the last days of their lives more uncomfortable and prolong the dying process.

### **Tube Feeding and Dementia**

Dementia is a very tragic disease, and the inability to eat is an expected part of its last stages. As patient’s dementia progresses, often patients will have increased difficulty with eating and swallowing. They may start to choke on food and drink, and be at risk of a respiratory infection. Some patients lose interest in food or forget how to swallow. These signs mark the end of a very sad and long disease process. Some may choose to treat these patients with a feeding tube. Families often fear not placing a tube means they are causing the patient to “starve” to death. Providing tube feeding is certainly an acceptable way to provide care.

However, it is important to remember that the patient isn’t feeling any hunger. Nor will inserting a tube stop the progression of the fatal disease, though it might prolong the dying process. Since dying without fluid is comfortable, many loved ones choose to forgo the tube feeding. Simply offer the patient whatever he or she can tolerate by spoon feeding and drinking. Sips of water and ice chips can relieve dry mouth.