

Oral care for someone who is dying

The desire to eat or drink at the end of life usually decreases. This is a natural response as body organs slow down and it becomes difficult to manage the intake of food and/or fluids.

This is a normal part of having advanced disease – it doesn't mean that your loved one is 'starving to death', or that you should try to force them to eat or drink.

The best way to make the person feel better is to provide frequent fluids while they are able to drink and, when that is no longer possible, to keep moistening their mouth.

People at the end of life are vulnerable to oral problems such as thrush no matter how well their mouth is cared for, so it is important to check the mouth for any sore places or coating that could indicate thrush.

Contact your health professional for help to manage your loved one's oral care.

Dry mouth is the most common problem, and a feeling of having no saliva.

Saliva can be stimulated by sucking lollies or mints, chewing sorbitol, xylitol-based gum, and reducing coffee and alcohol. Artificial saliva can be used, but the effect is no better than sipping fluids.

Good mouth care is important, as it maintains self-esteem, comfort, and our ability to communicate, socialise and enjoy food and drinks with others.



5 DRY MOUTH ALTERNATIVES

Semi frozen tonic water and gin

Semi frozen fruit juice or pieces of frozen pineapple

Frequent sips of cold water or water sprays

Petroleum jelly or balms on the lips

Frozen ice blocks



MOUTHWASHES

There is little conclusive evidence to support the use of mouthwashes; often towards the end of life the taste can be too strong, but some people have used washes daily for much of their life and may wish to continue to do so. Following are some mouthwash alternatives that may be used for short periods if there is thrush or coating in the mouth. In end of life care it is more important that whatever is used is acceptable and palatable to the person.

- Water is usually acceptable and is free or inexpensive, but will not remove coating.
- Normal saline (salt and water - 1 teaspoon to 500mls) is inexpensive and mildly antiseptic, but may not be acceptable if a person has altered taste or feels sick.
- Chlorhexidine is antibacterial and antifungal. It will need to be prescribed by a doctor, as it can interact with other medicines (for example those used for thrush). Sodium bicarbonate can clean a coated tongue, but it tastes unpleasant and can irritate tender skin. Sodium bicarbonate is sometimes used on

sponge mouth swabs; these can be used for short periods to reduce a coated tongue, but not all the time.

- Cider and soda water (half and half) tastes pleasant, and the effervescence may help to loosen and wash away debris in the mouth.
- Over-the-counter mouthwashes are often too astringent and can be painful to use for someone whose mouth is sore.
- Glycerine and lemon mouthwashes or mouth swabs will actually INCREASE dryness, as they draw water out of the mouth and may damage tooth enamel. These should be avoided.



ORAL CARE FOR THE PERSON WHO IS DYING AND CAN NO LONGER DRINK

This is an important aspect of end of life care. It is something that family, whanau, friends, and carers can do very easily, and allows special time with the person.

- Find out from the patient and/or their family what fluids they like.
- Mouth care should be done two hourly or more frequently if required to keep the mouth moist.
- Use maxi swabs (like oversize cotton buds), not sponge swabs containing sodium bicarbonate; this is unpleasant for the person if used too often and the sponges are quite abrasive if the person has a sore mouth.
- Teeth can be gently cleaned with a child's soft toothbrush.
- Use any fluids familiar to the person to swab the mouth – cooled tea or coffee, fruit juice, carbonated drinks, alcohol, cooled clear soups, ice cream or yoghurt. This will allow you to provide special things for your loved one, and the familiar fluids and touch of family, whanau, and friends will

lessen the shock for the person of having something placed in their mouth if they are not fully awake.

- Avoid iced water – this can be a shock for a person, especially if they have sensitive teeth.
- It is the act of moistening the mouth and not the fluid you use that is important.
- Take care if the mouth is painful or ulcerated; Bonjela may be useful to relieve the pain (put a little on a swab and very gently coat any sore areas).
- If the person has a history of high alcohol intake, swabbing their mouth with alcohol may keep them more settled.
- Clean dentures and soak in antiseptic solution overnight.
- Take care not to put a toothbrush or swab near the back of the mouth or it may cause gagging. Use gentle pressure with swabs or toothbrush.

