

## Intravenous Fluids and End-of-Life Care

TANYA LUGLIANI STEWART, M.D.

Families often inquire about the use of intravenous fluids as their loved one approaches their final days and are no longer able to eat or drink. Many are concerned about discomfort related to thirst. Others argue that to do nothing is unacceptable. There are some circumstances when intravenous fluid can be helpful, but in many cases intravenous fluids can cause more harm than good.

### The purpose of this page is:

- ✓ To review misperceptions regarding dehydration and intravenous fluids at the end of life
- ✓ To review potential benefits and harms of intravenous fluids
- ✓ To review the use of intravenous fluids in relation to overall goals for the patient

### Common misperceptions regarding intravenous fluids:

- ✓ Lack of fluids causes discomfort
- ✓ Lack of fluids causes thirst
- ✓ Withholding fluids is unethical and may hasten death

### Correct perceptions regarding intravenous fluids:

- ✓ Decreased fluid intake is a normal part of the dying process
- ✓ Dehydration may improve comfort
- ✓ Thirst is caused by dry mouth, not dehydration
- ✓ Small amounts of liquid are sufficient to sustain life

### Situations where intravenous fluids may benefit dying patients:

- ✓ Cancer of mouth or throat that may prevent normal swallow function
- ✓ Intestinal blockage causing vomiting
- ✓ Elevated calcium levels
- ✓ Confusion

### Possible risks of intravenous fluids at the end of life:

- ✓ May not improve symptoms or quality of life
- ✓ Increased swelling or edema
- ✓ Increased lung secretions
- ✓ Need to maintain intravenous access, which may be uncomfortable

### What to consider when contemplating the use of intravenous fluids:

- ✓ What is the goal in administering fluids?
- ✓ Will intravenous fluids cause harm?
- ✓ Are the patient's wishes being honored?
- ✓ Will there be regret from the caregivers if a time related trial is not done?

The information and recommendations appearing on this page are appropriate in most instances, but are not a substitute for medical diagnosis. For specific information concerning your personal situation or medical condition, JPM suggests that you consult your physician. This page may be photocopied noncommercially by physicians and other health care professionals to share with patients. Any other print or online reproduction is subject to approval by the publisher: Mary Ann Liebert, Inc. To purchase bulk reprints, call 914-740-2194.

## JPM PATIENT INFORMATION

1231

Although intravenous fluid administration at the end of life is rarely required for a peaceful death, it should be considered in certain situations. A thorough evaluation by the hospice nurse and physician can best help the patient and family make this challenging decision.

Address reprint requests to:  
*Tanya Lugliani Stewart, M.D.*  
*Adventist Health Hospice*  
*5835 NE 122nd Avenue #135*  
*Portland, OR 97230*

*E-mail: [stewart1@pa1.ah.org](mailto:stewart1@pa1.ah.org)*