

Decision Guides For End of Life Planning

Tube Feeding

What is Artificial Nutrition?

Artificial nutrition and hydration is a form of life-sustaining treatment. It is sometimes called medically assisted nutrition provided by placing a tube directly into the stomach, the intestine or a vein. Tube feeding provides artificial nutrition to those who cannot eat enough or are unable to eat. A feeding tube for short-term use is an N-G tube. An N-G tube is run through the nose and into the stomach.

A feeding tube for long-term use is called a PEG or G tube. A small hole is surgically cut in the abdomen into the stomach to place the tube.

Also, fluids can be delivered through a small needle that is inserted in a vein and hooked up to bags of fluid.

These tubes can be placed on a temporary or permanent basis.

Does a Feeding Tube Work?

Multiple medical studies have shown that survival rates for terminally ill patients are no different if they are artificially fed rather than not.

With either NG or PEG tubes there is less risk of the patient pulling the tube out. There is still the risk of pneumonia, however. Just like the nasogastric tube, there is little evidence that feeding through a gastrostomy tube will increase the health or life expectancy of terminally ill patients.

Tube feeding is most helpful if the person might be able to return to eating. For example, a feeding tube might help those who are having cancer treatments, have been injured or have had a stroke.

Options to Tube Feeding:

People who choose not to have tube feedings can be kept comfortable with small sips of water, ice chips and wetting of their mouths and lips. A dying person will not starve without a feeding tube. Continuing to feed by mouth may be an option.

For those who are still able to swallow, careful hand feeding may be tried. Patients have the right to choose to eat for pleasure even if it's a risk. It is important to understand that nearly all patients with a life-limiting illness stop eating and drinking at some point. It's important to keep in mind that your patient or loved one is not going to die of starvation or dehydration. Your patient will die from their underlying disease or condition.