

Oral Nutritional Supplement (ONS) prescribing in end-of-life care

Oral nutritional supplements (ONS) are drinks or other food supplements that contain energy (calories), protein, and micronutrients. They may be prescribed for the management of 'disease-related malnutrition'. These products are suitable to meet goals such as weight gain, preventing further weight loss, and to meet nutritional requirements.

At the end of life these goals may not be appropriate or realistic; the more important goal at this sensitive time is improving or maintaining the person's quality of life, comfort, and enjoyment of food and drink.

The General Medical Council defines approaching the end of life as when a person is likely to die within the next 12 months. The Gold Standards Framework (GSF) is commonly used to identify an individual's progress towards the end of life.

- Green: 6-12 months prognosis
- Amber: short months prognosis
- Red: last days to short weeks prognosis

These stages are useful as a guide to a person's nutrition needs near to the end of life.

Green: 6-12 months

In the green phase it is important to recognise changes in symptoms and appetite and try to make small changes to help someone to live as well as possible.

This may include making some dietary changes to improve their food intake, such as:

- Making food look attractive
- Having a glass of sherry, brandy, or favourite alcoholic drink about 30 minutes before eating (remember that the effects of alcohol may increase if unwell or taking certain medicines, so it is best to check with the doctor)
- Having snacks handy to nibble
- Drinking nourishing drinks
- Eating slowly
- Eating small meals more frequently on smaller plates

Amber: Short months

In the amber phase the nutritional content of the meal is no longer of prime importance and people should be encouraged to eat and drink the foods they enjoy.

At this stage the goal of nutrition therapy should not be weight gain or reversal of malnutrition, but it should be about quality of life, including comfort, symptom relief and enjoyment of food and drink.

At this stage ONS should not be started as the main aim is enjoyment of food and drink which should be met through favourite or preferred foods and drinks.

Red: Last days to short weeks

In the red phase, as the person nears the end of life, metabolism slows down, and the body no longer needs food as it cannot digest it and absorb the nutrients.

At this stage, it's important not to force people to eat and it's okay if they don't. As a carer you might feel anxious or upset because your relative or friend no longer wants or enjoys food. Although this can be hard to accept, it's important that you don't try to force them to eat. Remember that reduced intake is a natural part of the dying process, and the person is unlikely to feel hunger and thirst in the same way as when they were well. It is not helpful to think of this as 'starving'. The person may also lose the ability to swallow safely, especially if they are very drowsy.

You may want to try offering drinks they like instead.

At this stage ONS should not be started as this may cause more unpleasant symptoms as the body is unable to digest and absorb the drinks.