

Medically Assisted Nutrition and Hydration (Tube Feeding)

In the Catholic tradition, providing a patient with nutrition and hydration, even by medical means, is considered part of the normal care due to the sick person. For this reason, **there is, in principle, a moral obligation to provide patients with medically assisted nutrition and hydration when they have need of it.**

Medically assisted nutrition and hydration can benefit patients in various ways. For example:

- It can help to stabilize a patient's physical status following severe trauma.
- It can provide nutrition and hydration during a restoration period following surgery.
- It allows a restful healing time for a diseased or damaged gastrointestinal tract.
- It can help patients suffering from severe nausea and vomiting or patients who have diarrhea causing serious dehydration.
- It prolongs life in patients unable to take adequate nutrition by mouth.

The obligation to provide medically assisted nutrition and hydration includes patients suffering from chronic and

presumably irreversible conditions (e.g., vegetative state).

On the other hand, **there is no moral obligation to provide medically assisted nutrition and hydration if it will not work to prolong the patient's life.** In this case, it will not provide benefit to the patient. For example:

- A patient may be suffering from such severe heart, kidney, or liver failure that his body cannot process the nutrients or fluids supplied through the feeding device.
- A feeding tube itself may develop complications such as infection or bleeding.

Medically assisted nutrition and hydration carries burdens of physical risks and complications. For example:

- Aspiration pneumonia can occur.
- The patient may experience diarrhea.
- The patient may experience nausea and vomiting, with the risk of inhaling his/her own vomit in turn causing lung infections and respiratory complications.

- A patient may have to be restrained to prevent him/her from pulling out the feeding tube.

There is no moral obligation to provide medically assisted nutrition and hydration if it would be excessively burdensome for the patient.

The examples presented are just that. ***The benefits and burdens of medically assisted nutrition and hydration must always be determined on a case by case basis, for each patient in view of his/her particular health condition, in consultation with the patient's health care providers.***

Sources

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Medical-Moral Commission of the
Archdiocese of Dubuque July 2016.

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