

# Nutrition by Artificial Means Guide

Know your  
rights and have  
your say about  
your mental  
health care  
and treatment.

# What is nutrition by artificial means?

Sometimes, as a result of an eating disorder or mental illness, your safety and welfare might be at risk because you are not taking adequate nutrition.

In order to protect you and sustain your life, your doctor might decide to provide you with nutrition by artificial means. This means you are fed by means of a tube placed directly into your stomach, intestine or vein.

A doctor can authorise nutrition by artificial means by following regulations laid out in the Mental Health Act.

Feeding by artificial means in cases of eating disorders is an intervention aimed directly at sustaining your life, but also to help you gain enough weight to improve physical wellbeing to an extent that will enable you to engage in therapy that will help your recovery on a longer term basis.

## What this guidance is about:

Should you find yourself in a situation where nutrition by artificial means is being considered, we aim to help you understand:

- Your rights.
- How you can expect to be treated.
- Subsequent actions you may wish to take.

# How might you be given nutrition by artificial means?

Nutrition by artificial means can include:

- **Nasogastric feeding tube** – where a thin, flexible tube is gently inserted into your nostril, down the back of the throat and into your stomach.
- **Percutaneous gastrostomy (PEG) tube** - a procedure in which a flexible feeding tube is placed through your abdominal wall and into your stomach.
- **Intravenous drip** - a short, small plastic tube that is put into your vein using a needle.

These may be used by your doctor to treat you for an eating disorder or if you refuse or fail to take adequate nutrition as a consequence of another mental illness.

There is an important difference between these artificial means and forcible feeding. Forcible feeding is when direct force is used to make you swallow food. The Mental Health Act Code of Practice makes it clear that your doctor should avoid using forcible feeding. There are times when a doctor may have to use force, for example to insert a nasogastric tube. The law allows for the use of force, but only if treatment is necessary and cannot be achieved in other ways. Any force should be the minimum necessary and only for as long as necessary.

Hydration by artificial means, for example by intravenous drip, could be given as a treatment to save your life. Any nutritional component in the fluids used is minimal and nutrition is not the purpose of such treatment.

# If you are given nutrition by artificial means, what should you expect?

There are some key principles which should form part of your doctor's decision to provide you with nutrition by artificial means:

- The team providing your treatment should seek to discuss this decision with you and explain why they believe it is necessary. You should always have access to advocacy. Your hospital staff can give you the details of your local advocacy service.
- Any decision to proceed to treatment without your consent should only be taken when the physical risk clearly justifies this and all other possibilities have been considered.
- Your treatment must be carried out in a setting where there is an appropriate level of expert knowledge and experience.
- Your family, or other key people in your life, should usually be involved in the decision making process.
- Tactics to coerce or unnecessarily frighten you into agreement must be avoided.

As with all medical treatments, the grounds for continuing treatment must be regularly reviewed. This is particularly important if you do not consent to the treatment.

In the first instance, it is recommended that your treatment is authorised for a maximum of three months. After the first three months it may be appropriate to authorise further nutrition by artificial means for a longer period of time.

## What if you do not consent to nutrition by artificial means?

If you are fed by artificial means without your consent, this should only be considered where other treatment options have been fully explored and exhausted. It is essential that your individual needs and circumstances are taken into account before your doctor proceeds with treatment.

If you do not consent, nutrition by artificial means can only be given where a second opinion from a doctor known as a Designated Medical Practitioner (DMP) appointed by the Mental Welfare Commission agrees that the treatment is in your best interests, for instance in order to save your life or prevent serious suffering.

# What are your rights if you are given nutrition by artificial means?

You have the right to access support from an independent advocate who can help you to express your views and concerns and explore your options. Your hospital staff can give you the details of your local advocacy service.

If you are detained in hospital, you will have the right to a named person who will help make sure that your views and wishes are considered in care and treatment decisions. A named person is someone you have chosen to represent your interests, likely a relative or friend.

The named person must be informed and consulted about aspects of your care and can make certain applications on your behalf.

If you are under 16, you are unable to choose your named person. Your named person will automatically be the person who has parental rights and responsibilities.

A Designated Medical Practitioner must consult with your named person (amongst others), if practicable, before making a decision about authorising the giving of nutrition by artificial means.

In relation to nutrition by artificial means, your named person has the right to:

- Be consulted about any intention to give you nutrition by artificial means.
- Request copies of certain records or information given to you, including the record that must be made if you have received treatment which conflicts with your advance statement (see separate Advance Statement guide).

As a person with a mental illness or learning disability, during your care, treatment and support you have the same rights as others to:

- Be treated with dignity and respect for your privacy, beliefs and individual needs.
- Not be discriminated against.
- Be given opportunities to use and develop your skills.
- Receive information about and be involved as much as possible in any assessment, planning and decision making about your care and treatment.
- Access the support of an independent advocate.
- Have your choices respected and taken fully into account.
- Involve relatives, friends or carers who are important to you in your care, who will be provided with the information they need.
- Receive care, treatment and support that benefits you and is the least restrictive option.
- Access information and help to challenge any restrictions placed upon you.
- Be kept safe and protected.

More information, as well as further downloadable guides, are available on our website: [www.mwcscot.org.uk](http://www.mwcscot.org.uk)

More detailed information on this topic can be found in our Good Practice Guide on Nutrition by Artificial Means.

You can contact our advice line for service users and carers on: **0800 389 6809** or **0131 313 8777**.