Information about Tube Feeding for Residents and Families

As one ages, health problems can cause one to lose more and more of one's mental and physical abilities. Sometimes this means that a person can no longer swallow properly and is at risk of the food going into the lungs which then causes pneumonia.
The staff are able to feed residents, but if swallowing is an issue then a person ends up not being able to get all the nutrients and fluids they need to remain healthy.

Treatment

Sometimes a speech therapist may be able to improve a person's swallowing ability and can change the consistency of the food to improve swallowing, but if this does not work, then a feeding tube can be placed in a person's stomach and liquids passed through this tube that contain nutrition and fluids.

Two types of tube can be used; a short term solution is a tube that is passed down a person's nose and into their throat into the stomach. If a feeding tube is required for more than a week or so it can be placed in the stomach. In order for this to happen, an operation is required. This operation is usually safe although there are risks associated with surgery such as bleeding and infection.

Choices

Feeding tubes are not for everyone. They can be used for a short time and removed if a person's ability to swallow returns, or they can be used for the rest of a person's life.
It is sensible to consider what you want before you can no longer make a decision. Residents can complete advance directives which make their wishes known to staff and their doctors and this can include a "no tube feeding" order. Understanding the benefits and risks of tube feeding is important before you make the decision, and the paragraph below provides some information about this:

Benefits of tube feeding

Tube feeding can provide nutrition and fluids on a temporary or long term basis when a person is unable to eat or drink or have difficulty swallowing. However, many research studies show that tube feeding does **not** improve function or quality of life. Tube feeding also does not prevent episodes of pneumonia due to swallowing trouble, or the development or healing of pressure sores that can be caused by not moving around and not having enough nutrition or fluid.

Risks of tube feeding

Although tube feeding can provide a person with nutrition and fluids there are risks. These include complications of the surgery such as bleeding, pain and infection. The area around the tube can become irritated, painful or infected. The tube may become blocked or fall out and this requires trips to the hospital to have it replaced.