

Information for Detainees on Hunger Strike

(Advice in this leaflet is ONLY for people who are drinking water and have no other medical problems.)

- ▶ **We do not recommend hunger striking.**
- ▶ **We try to help people who refuse food to avoid harm from which they can not recover**
- ▶ **Refusing to drink is dangerous after about three days**

There is no medical information about children or pregnant women on hunger strike. It is impossible to give safe advice about this situation. We very strongly recommend that children and pregnant women should be discouraged from taking part. We also strongly recommend that where a whole family is detained, at least one parent should refrain from food refusal, no matter what the provocation.

UP TO 14 days - hunger strikers who drink enough fluid and had no serious medical condition before are relatively unlikely to suffer serious harm. This is not true if you are diabetic, have previous kidney problems, or some other health problems. You may get severe abdominal pain; there is often constipation. Thinking clearly can also become difficult. Some people will find these symptoms so bad they decide to eat (re-feed). Re-feeding up to 14 days should be done with small amounts of easily digested food. Cramping abdominal pain and diarrhea often occur during re-feeding at this stage. The nurses and doctors at the medical centre have a duty to advise you about re-feeding.

AFTER 14 - 21 days, important medical changes begin.

- The body's supplies of many essential materials is used up.
- You begin to burn muscle bulk to generate energy.
- The feeling of thirst becomes unreliable; hunger strikers can become dangerously dehydrated without knowing it.
- You may become lightheaded or confused
- Some vitamins get used up and chemical disorders can develop in the blood; this is important to how you re-feed, if and when you decide to do so.

According to expert advice it is not safe to re-feed outside hospital after loss of more than 10% of your body weight or 14 days without food. If you reach that point, and want us to, a Medical Justice doctor will try to see you.

Things you may want to think about now:

1. The medical centre doctor(s) may ask you to sign an "advanced directive". This is a document which says that - if you become so ill that you are unable to make any decision - the doctors should NOT treat you. There is no reason why you have to sign this, no matter what pressure they put on you. You can always sign it later if you want to.
2. You have the right to read your own medical notes, and to have them copied to a doctor or lawyer of your choice. You have the right to medical care equivalent to that of the NHS, and, as a detainee the right to secondary hospital care on the NHS. See the Medical Justice leaflet "Know Your Medical Rights"
3. There is an important difference between not eating and refusing both food and water. Kidney failure will set in after about 4-7 days if you take no water. This can recover if treated effectively and quickly. If you are taking water, some time after 21 days, your body may not feel thirst properly. It may be useful to measure how much you drink and how much water you pass. You may want to ask the medical centre for jugs to measure fluid intake and urine output.
4. Getting adequate care from detention centre doctors and nurses: there are certain simple measurements and tests which indicate when a hunger strike is becoming dangerous to your health, including ;
 - i. How much weight have you lost since the start of the hunger strike?
 - ii. Are you drinking enough and putting out enough urine?
 - iii. What is happening to your blood chemistry?

The doctors and nurses in detention centre have a duty to do these tests as they are needed, but only if you agree to them. They also have a duty to give you the results and explain honestly and clearly what they mean.

Medical Justice is a network of volunteer doctors, ex-detainees, and others. Our main purpose is to improve healthcare for asylum seekers. We do our best, but our resources do not allow us to see everyone who asks for help. We have no paid staff and no formal funding so availability of volunteer doctors may be extremely limited. We suggest that before you seek help from Medical Justice that you ask your solicitor or supporters if they can arrange for you to be visited by an independent doctor. We are not licensed to give immigration advice. Our doctors are licensed to give medical advice.