



Keeping Someone at Home After Their Last Breath

This information is for anyone who is thinking about keeping someone at home after they take their last breath. This can be for a few days or until their funeral. Many people find it useful, healing, intimate, sacred or vital to tend a loved one at this time. Others find it too difficult, or not possible. It is a personal choice. *Your* choices will likely be influenced by your personal beliefs, past experiences, community culture and/or finances.

Being at Home

People nowadays often choose to tend someone's body at home as part of a home funeral, arranging everything themselves without a funeral director. Even if you use a funeral director for all the funeral arrangements, the positive benefits to you of being with someone you care for in the familiarity of home for a few days can be immeasurable. When someone dies outside the home eg in hospital, hospice or a care home, it is also worth thinking about the benefits of taking them home – for a few days or until their funeral.

You can create a sense of ritual by using music and candles or just sit in privacy and comfort gently getting to know that their life, your life and your relationship has changed forever. Gathering with others or inviting visitors offers the opportunity for story-telling, sharing thoughts, laughter and tears: all important elements in the grieving process.

A last loving act

Taking care of someone who has died may feel daunting because of shock or your emotional state. It can be confronting especially to care for a child or young person –and also incredibly meaningful and beneficial in your loss. It can be a last loving act.

Being close to someone who has died

Handling the body of someone who has died can be a natural progression to caring for them in life. However, if initially preparing the body seems challenging, it may be useful to ask for help from a nurse or carer, as this usually takes less than an hour. If you don't want to participate in this aspect, you can still benefit greatly from being in a familiar place with their body as you start to get used to the loss of an important person in your life.

Being with someone's body at home after their death often offers a gentle release, a healthier bereavement and beautiful memories.

Frequently Asked Questions

What happens if something goes wrong ?

It is unusual for something to “go wrong”. If you are worried that something might “go wrong”, then contact us to discuss your concerns and work out what you need.

Is there a rush to do anything ?

No, there is no rush to do anything for the first few hours after death. After that, at home, you need to arrange for a health professional to come to confirm the death – this takes about 10 minutes. Washing and dressing is best done when there is no *rigor mortis* (stiffness). This begins about 3 - 6 hours after death and eases again about 12 - 72 hours after death. Someone who has died can lie wherever seems right to you – on a bed, in a special place or in a coffin.

Will there be a horrible smell ?

Everybody will naturally decompose over time – we are cleverly designed that way. This can create an odour we are unaccustomed to but this would very rarely be a problem in less than a week, especially if you keep the room cool and place ice packs on and around a torso.

What about body fluids ?

Whilst body fluids definitely need to be considered, a few straightforward practical steps are all that is needed to deal with them, as in life eg continence pads. You do not need to pack orifices with cotton wool.

What if the eyes or mouth don't close?

There are simple ways to close the eyes and mouth but it may be that the eyes and mouth do not stay naturally fully closed. This is not a problem unless it is disturbing to someone, in which case a handkerchief can cover the face.

Do we need special equipment to move a body ?

No. You can move an average sized person around the house e.g. from a bed to a coffin with 6 able bodied people and a strong sheet or board. If you need to move a coffin then have a trial run with the coffin empty and also check that the coffin will fit in any vehicle for transport later.

Do I need specialist help ?

Not usually, but if you have not done any physical, hands-on care then it would be wise to have assistance from someone who is comfortable handling and moving people in bed. You will need two able people for washing/dressing. You may need help from a nurse/doctor/funeral director to remove medical devices eg catheter or pacemaker.

It is advisable to always source help if you are considering to care for an obese person, someone with large wounds or weeping skin or someone who has had septicaemia while alive.

Sources of help

For advice in Scotland contact

info@pushingupthedaisies.org.uk or 0300 102 4444.

The Natural Death Centre can also give advice on 01962 712690. They produce the excellent Natural Death Handbook.

You could also contact a local funeral director for advice. However, be aware that they are used to caring for people in their premises and may not understand that you want to keep someone at home. You may need to ask around to find one willing to help.