



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

The positive benefits to you of being with someone who has taken their last breath for a few days in the familiarity of home can be immeasurable. When someone takes their last breath 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.

By simply sitting in privacy and comfort, perhaps with music or candles, you can gently begin to appreciate 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.

You can decide what you want to do yourselves and what help, if any, you want from a funeral director.

A last loving act

Taking care of someone after their last breath 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 after their last breath

The initial preparation of someone's body takes about an hour and, if you have not done it before, a nurse or carer may be willing to assist you or do it for you if you prefer. Whether you participate in this or not, being with their body afterwards in a familiar place can be a special and valuable experience as you start to get used to the change in your relationship with an important person in your life.

Being with someone's body at home after their last breath often offers a gentle release, an easier adjustment 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 – 0300 102 4444.

Is there a rush to do anything ?

No, there is no rush to do anything for the first few hours after someone's last breath. After that, at home, you need to arrange for a health professional to come to verify the death – this takes about 10 minutes. Washing and dressing is done most easily when there is no rigor mortis (stiffness), but this is not essential. Stiff muscles can be moved by massaging them. Stiffness begins after about 3 - 6 hours and eases again in about 12 - 72 hours. The person 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 they 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. It may be possible to borrow a sliding sheet from nurses.

If you need to move a coffin around a house 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

www.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.