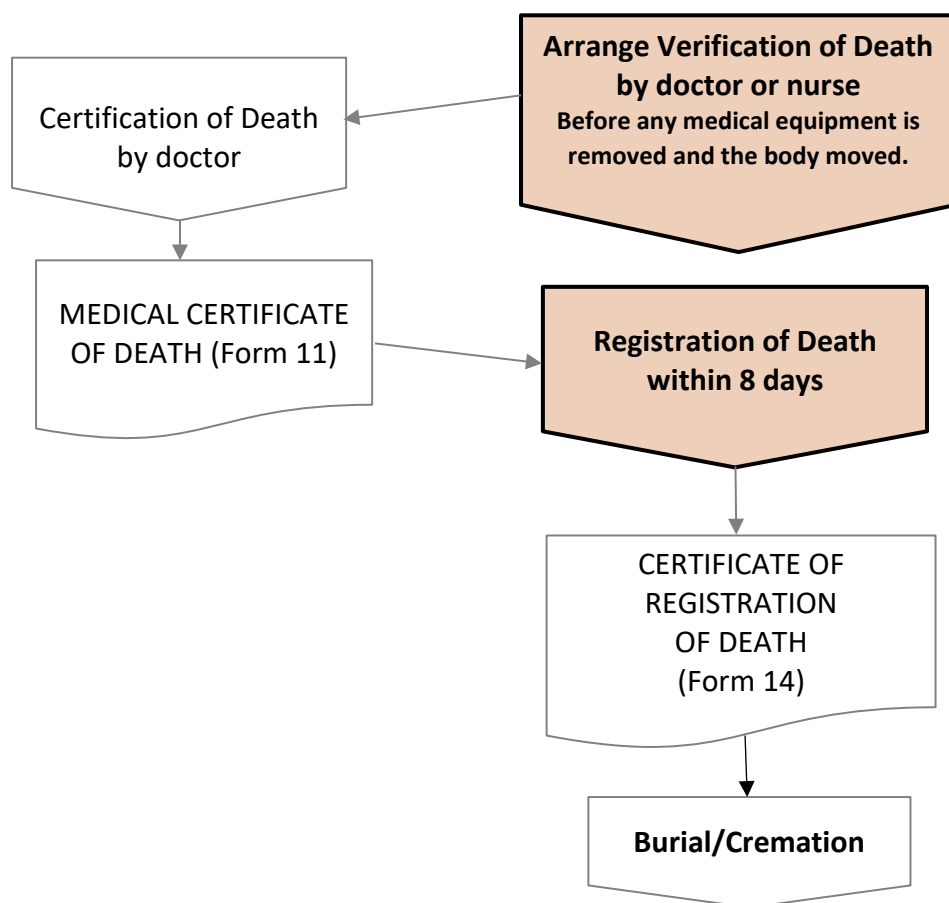


PRACTICAL CARE OF SOMEONE AT HOME AFTER THEIR LAST BREATH

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.



* If death is sudden, unexpected, suspicious, after discharge from hospital, or if a doctor has not seen the person within the past 14 days, then it is referred to the Procurator Fiscal which may, but not necessarily, result in a post-mortem examination.

** Usually the nearest relative or executor registers a death, but anyone who has the necessary information can do it.

*** No-one, including “next-of-kin” has a responsibility to arrange burial or cremation of someone’s body, but they are responsible to pay for any arrangements they make to do so. The local authority has ultimate responsibility.

More information on “What to do after a death in Scotland” is on the Scottish Government website or tel 0131 244 2193 for a copy.

Being at Home

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.

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.

Being close to someone who has died

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 death often offers a gentle release, an easier adjustment and beautiful memories.

AFTER DEATH LEGALITIES

There is no time limit after death within which someone has to be buried or cremated.

You can keep someone at home between their death and burial or cremation.

You can transport someone's dead body in any vehicle, as long as it is covered.

You can bury someone in a garden with permission from the local authority and SEPA and, of course, the landowner.

Funeral directors don't have to be involved, unless you want them to be*.

Ashes can be scattered anywhere you like as long as you have the landowner's permission.

You can name anyone you want to arrange your funeral. There is no legal form for it – you can write it, for example, in a Will or on a signed piece of paper. If you don't name anyone there is a legal hierarchy of who can arrange the funeral.

A death must be registered within 8 days – and before burial or cremation.

Nobody actually OWNS someone's body after they die, but the person named as the Executor in the Will of the deceased, or if there is no Will, the person most entitled to be appointed Executor, has the right to decide how their body is to be cared for. Very often, that person also happens to be the closest family member.

* or you need to use a private crematorium which insists that a funeral director arranges the cremation. (Not all crematoria do require this.)

IMMEDIATELY AFTER DEATH

This information relates to home. It will be different in hospital, hospice or care home.

1. Note the time of death.
2. PAUSE – take as much time as you need to do whatever you need to do. It's not a time to “do the right thing”. You need do nothing for several hours.
3. When you are ready, call the GP or out of hours service - they must visit to verify the death. Ask the approximate time they will come –sometimes this may take some time.
4. Wait until a health professional has visited before you move someone or remove any medical equipment.
5. While you are waiting for a health professional to visit you can
 - lay the body in a straight line on their back– the head can be elevated slightly
 - clean the mouth and replace any dentures, using fixative if necessary
 - close the mouth with a pillow or rolled-up handtowel under their chin or a scarf around their head
 - close the eyelids gently with your fingers – or try placing an eye wheat bag, bag of rice or some damp tissue over them
 - place a continence pad or towel under the pelvis if there is not already one there.
6. Be prepared that rigor mortis (natural muscle stiffening) may start after about 3 hours but more usually 6.
7. Make plans for washing and dressing *if you want that to be done* – either do it yourself or get help from a community nurse or a funeral director. Choose if and when you would like a funeral director to visit and/or for the body to be removed. Note that there is usually an extra call out charge at night, and rarely any practical reason not to wait until morning.

ADVANCE PREPARATION

It is not always possible to plan things in advance, and not always necessary. Whilst your intuition and common sense will guide you, there are a few advance preparations which are worth considering to smooth the journey and minimise the surprises along the way.

Remember that if you choose you can do everything yourself preferably with help from those close to you. Be sure to delegate and share the tasks involved in this to allow yourself time to take in what has happened. With a death outside the home, it may be an option to consider temporary use of a hospital mortuary or funeral home until you get organised. If you are planning to use a funeral director, be clear about exactly what you want them to do and how much it will cost.

Inform involved health professionals about your plans. They may be able to speed verification and certification of death to suit. A doctor may remove a pacemaker/ ICD if needed. Try to obtain information about any implants which may cause a concern for cremation.

They may also be willing to give you continence and disposable bed pads and waterproof dressings and/or help with washing/ dressing if you wish.

If transporting someone from a hospital/ hospice/care home check:

- (a) if they have protocols you need to prepare for (eg contacting the police – although this is not legally required);
- (b) if the death is unexpected, whether it is likely to be referred to the Procurator Fiscal, and
- (c) whether they have staff who can assist with moving the person's body to your vehicle.

Work out how you will cool their body. Stock up with freezer blocks/gel packs if you are going to use them – get enough to allow for changeover. If this doesn't appeal then you can hire a room cooling unit from most Tool Hire shops.

Prepare your Home Death Kit Be sure you can get continence pads.

Discuss plans with family and others who will be involved after someone's last breath.

Choose a coffin or shroud – ensure they meet any necessary criteria if you are planning a cremation or natural burial. It is best to wait until close to the time of death if possible to buy a coffin to ensure it is a suitable size.

Moving the body/ coffin around the home – consider a trial run, ideally with the people who will be doing it, to make sure you can get around corners etc.

Think about using a Funeral Director – if you only want some services then be sure to find a flexible one, be clear about exactly what you want them to do and how much it will cost.

Think about the funeral timing – if people need to travel back long distances, or there is another need to delay a communal gathering, then consider having an earlier, perhaps private, burial or cremation ceremony separate from a later memorial service or ceremony, perhaps with the ashes, at the grave or in a local hall.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What happens if something goes wrong ?

It is unusual for something to go wrong. If you are worried about this, then contact us to discuss your concerns and help you 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. Someone who has died can lie wherever seems right to you – on a bed, in a special place or in a coffin.

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.

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 under the person's body.

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 or beautiful cloth 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.

For Body Care

Most things you need are everyday items. If someone has been cared for at home, then it is very likely that the other items will already be in the house. If not, you can ask your community nurse to provide some of them.

If someone has been in hospital, then ask the nurses for supplies before leaving.

For body fluids absorbent bed and continence pads, wet wipes, and possibly also: scissors (for catheter), disposable gloves, bed protection, towels and waterproof dressings.

For washing face cloths, towels, basin, soap or wet wipes, mouth wash, sponges, toothbrush, hairbrush or comb, Vaseline or lip salve, moisturising lotion and possibly also: a new safety razor, shaving cream, denture fixative, dry shampoo cap and nail clippers and file.

For ongoing care strong bed sheet, cooling packs, handkerchief/cloth for face, insect repellent, insect net for open windows. You may wish to use essential oils for their antibacterial properties, as an insect repellent, for odour control and for a supportive atmosphere. You may also wish to use flowers and candles.

HANDY HINTS

COOLING

Use picnic freezer blocks, gel packs, "cool cubs"
Freeze plenty beforehand
Wrap in a pillow case/towel to reduce condensation
Air conditioning units can be hired from tool shops

CREMATION

Pacemakers/ ICDs **MUST** be removed.
There are restrictions on clothing/items.
Ask the crematorium for advice about
any other implants.

REMOVING MEDICAL DEVICES

NEVER do this until death has been verified

WASHING/ DRESSING

Always have at least 2 people
Can use wet wipes/ foam spray/ dry shampoo
Ensure any wounds (especially under the body) are sealed with waterproof dressings
Apply a continence pad and check every so often for leakage
Cut along the back of clothes if tricky to put on
After washing put a strong sheet under to help with moving

ODOURS

Use deodorising air freshener gels, incense sticks or candles
Massage essential oils into the skin and/or drip around the body

CLOSING EYES/ MOUTH

Only necessary if causing distress to anyone
Try raising head, rolled up towel under chin,
Try bag of rice over eyes, small piece of tissue
under eyelid, or vaseline between lids

FLIES

(maggots hatch within 2 days)
Keep mouth/ nose covered
Can use insect repellent and net
Cedarwood oil around the body

MOVING THE BODY

NEVER move from place of death until the death has been verified
Can move a body in any car/van - it just needs to be covered
Consider a trial run if moving in a coffin
15st body requires 6 people to lift (depending on weight of any coffin)

COFFINS/ SHROUDS

Crematoriums and natural burial grounds usually have criteria to meet
Coffins can be bought direct online
If using a shroud for burial/cremation, wrap on the day of the funeral

This booklet highlights the main points for Practical Care of Someone at Home After Their Last Breath. We recognise that currently in Scotland only approximately 25% of people take their last breath at home. About 50% of people do it in hospital, 20% in care homes and 5% in hospices. Unless someone dies suddenly (when the Police and Procurator Fiscal may be involved) it is usually possible to take them home. You can either ask a Funeral Director to do this or do it yourself. You can see our website for further information about this or contact us for advice.

This booklet was prepared by Pushing Up The Daisies to empower people to take care of someone after their last breath. It is a starting point to highlight the main practical points and is not a comprehensive guide.

We offer an online course, *After the Last Breath*, to demystify after death care. It aims to inform and inspire you of the potential for meaningful connection in the period between someone's last breath and their burial or cremation.

For further information

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Pushing up
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