

ADVICE FOR
THE TIME OF DEATH

PAUSE
TAKE YOUR TIME
THERE IS NO NEED TO RUSH

When someone dies

It is common for thoughts to quickly turn to “What’s the right thing to do now ?” Firstly, there is no one “right thing to do”. There are a few advisable things to do which we tell you about below, and no rush to do any of them. We suggest to first ask yourself “What is the right thing to do for myself, the others around and the person who has died ?”

The main thing to know is that there is no rush to call a funeral director, unless you want to, even if the GP or other health professional who visits suggest that you do. **We recommend that you Pause, take your time, carry out the tasks below and see how you feel after 24 hours.** You will never have this time with your loved one again. Do not rush to have them taken out of your care.

1. Note the time of death.
2. PAUSE – take as much time as you need to do whatever you need to do. You need do nothing for several hours.
3. Cool the room - switch off heating, open windows.
4. When people have naturally started to move about and when you are ready, call the GP or out of hours service - they must visit to officially confirm that the person has died (called “verification”). Ask the approximate time they will come –sometimes this may take some time and may not come until morning if you call overnight.
5. Cool the body – remove duvets/blankets, place cool packs (or picnic blocks) over and under their tummy if available
6. Place a continence pad or towel under the pelvis if there is not one already there.

If the person has died overnight, it is then perfectly safe to wait until morning before doing anything else. In the morning you can call us on 0300 102 4444 to discuss your options or call a funeral director. Be prepared though that a funeral director will likely encourage you to have the person taken into their care. There is usually very little practical reason for this. If this doesn’t feel quite right to you, read on

Continuing Care of their Body

Especially if you have already been caring for someone, you may wish to tend to their body. Some people have strong views about not doing this so if that is your case try your best not to be influenced. It is important that carers gently release their caring relationship.

Note: Wait until the GP or out of hours service has visited to confirm the person has died before you move someone or remove any medical equipment.

While you are waiting for a doctor to visit you can

- lay the body in a straight line on their back with their head raised on a pillow
- clean their mouth and replace any dentures, using fixative if necessary

- close their mouth with a pillow or rolled-up handtowel under their chin or a scarf around their head
- close their eyelids gently with your fingers – or if that doesn't work 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.

If you feel confident, have the support of at least one other person and wish to wash and dress their body you can do this too. Remember not to remove medical equipment until “death verification” has taken place. There is no need to do this though and don't be at all concerned if you do not want to. If you want it done but are not confident to do it yourself it may be that a friend will help you later, a community nurse can help you when they next visit or a funeral director can do it later.

Be prepared that rigor mortis (natural muscle stiffening) may start after about 3 hours but more usually 6. Note that rigor mortis usually wears off after a couple of days and then a body stays floppy until the funeral. Whilst the body has rigor mortis it is perfectly safe to massage muscles if you need to move limbs – you will not break any bones.

Calling for help

If you are concerned you can call Pushing Up The Daisies on 0300 102 4444 for advice and support (between 9am and 10pm) or you can also call a funeral director at any time.

Be prepared though that a funeral director will likely encourage you to have the person taken into their care as this has become “the norm” in recent years.

Choose if and when you would like a funeral director to visit. Note that there is often an extra call out charge at night, and rarely any practical reason not to wait until morning.

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 others or 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 legal 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.

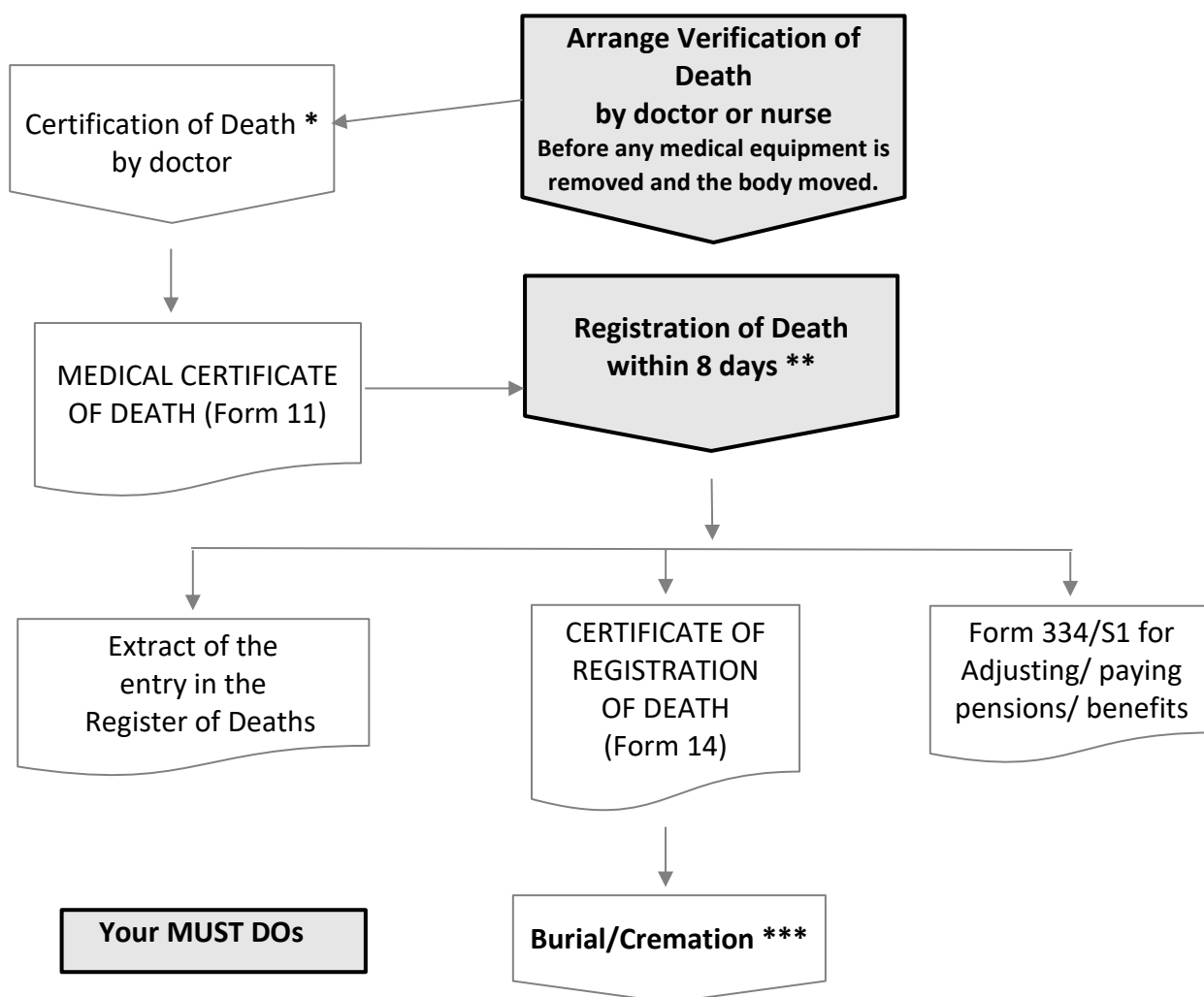
You can name anyone you want to arrange your funeral. There is no legal form for it – you can write it, for example, in a Will or on a signed piece of paper. If you don't name anyone there is a legal hierarchy in Scotland of who can arrange the funeral.

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.)

MUST DOs



* 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.

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 to help.

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.

Further Information

Call us on 0300 102 4444 or see our website information page - pushingupthedaisies.org.uk/information

You can also get good information from

The Natural Death Centre 01962 712690 naturaldeath.org.uk

and

The Good Funeral Guide goodfuneralguide.co.uk

For further information
pushingupthedaisies.org.uk
afterthelastbreath.scot
0300 102 4444
office@afterthelastbreath.scot

Pushing Up The Daisies has a network around Scotland of people who may be able to help. We also hold a directory of soul midwives and funeral celebrants who may be able to give advice and practical help.

