The Daisy Body Care Manual

Information on legalities and other things to think about after someone's last breath are available on our website www.pushingupthedaisies.org.uk.

This manual is offered to demystify the practicalities of tending someone's body after their last breath. People who do this often find it a profoundly honouring and awe inspiring experience. It can be performed in a practical or a sacred way – whatever feels right to those doing it.

If it feels uncomfortable to you, it is worth considering asking someone else to do this and finding meaningful connection with someone's body at home in other ways e.g. singing to them.

Our advice for what to do after someone takes their last breath is

First … do nothing for a while, take in what it feels like
Next … follow your instincts
Remember … there is no rush
Always …. ask for help if you need it

It is natural to feel apprehensive the first few times you tend someone after their last breath. Before you begin …

… make sure the atmosphere in the room is as comfortable and supportive as possible *for you*,

… if you have them available, use calming essential oils like lavender or frankincense,

… take other supportive measures for yourself if you can like Bach Rescue Remedy, available from chemists.

Contents

Note:

1. If the person wanted to donate their body to science, they will have arranged this in advance with a University. Contact the University as soon as possible and they will arrange for their body to be collected.
2. If the person wanted to donate organs or tissues, contact the transplantation service as soon as possible.
3. Do not move anyone or remove medical devices before their death has been verified by a health professional.

Recommended First Hour at Home

Take your time, do not rush to do anything

Deep breaths ..... allow whatever emotions/feelings comes (away from the body)

Calmly encourage the person on their way

Gently attend to the atmosphere

Notice if you or someone else needs time alone with the person who has died

Notice if you need a rest

Recommended First Day at Home

Take your time, do not rush to do anything

Cool the room and gently attend to a supportive atmosphere

Wait until people have naturally started moving about before calling the GP

Attend to the body yourself with assistance or contact someone for help

Rest, walk in nature

TENDING TO SOMEONE AFTER THEIR LAST BREATH

Tending someone's body after their last breath is sometimes called 'Last Offices' or 'Laying Out' by nurses and 'First Offices' by funeral directors.

There is no right or wrong way to do this. It usually involves some recommended preparations, washing and dressing. However, it may not be necessary to wash their body at all depending on people's views or wishes and when it was last washed. Dressing can vary from covering their naked body with a sheet to full Highland dress.

If you know that their body is only going to be in the home for less than 48 hours it is unlikely that anything is essential.

This can be a valuable and meaningful experience for the significant people in the life of the person who has taken their last breath and an opportunity to honour them.

Expected Physical Changes

You will probably see the underside of the body looking mottled or bruised. This is normal. If the body or, for example, the hands are moved in the first hours this discolouration usually moves. It then becomes fixed. The skin on the rest of the body will become pale and sometimes develop a waxy appearance. The eyes will gradually move backwards into the eye sockets. The eyelids and lips may become dry.

Cautions

There are some situations where you may need to take extra care with tending to leaking fluids and cooling the body. This would be likely if the person is obese, has been eating/drinking or had septicaemia in recent days, has large wounds or has been taking blood thinning medication. Consider calling us for guidance on this.

Items You Will Need:

For dealing with body fluids, you will need absorbent bed and continence pads, wet wipes, and possibly also scissors—if they have a catheter—disposable gloves, bed protection, towels and waterproof dressings.

For washing the face and body, you will need face cloths, towels, a basin, soap or wet wipes, mouthwash, sponges, a toothbrush, a 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 or a file.

For ongoing care, you will need a strong bed sheet, cooling packs, a handkerchief or a cloth for their face, insect repellent and an 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.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

If you are at all nervous, contact someone who can support you over the phone. It is perfectly respectful to cover someone's body and leave the room to seek advice at any time.

Consider:

- the views of the person who has taken their last breath and all the people concerned, especially the quiet ones – discuss any of the person's last wishes and others' wishes and apprehensions;
- who is going to be help – you need at least one other person to help. One of you needs to be comfortable touching and turning someone. Other people may help in other ways eg fetching things or making tea.
- who is going to be present - this may be the first time some people have seen a dead body and they may need gentle encouragement to help. People can be present in the space without touching or looking at the body - even people who are initially fearful and repulsed can benefit from taking part in this final act of love;
- the best place to prepare their body – a bed is usually the most practical place but it is possible to do it in a coffin if necessary;
- the best way to wash and turn their body for your safety – is it in the best position available eg in terms of bed height and access to both sides ?
- protection of the bed – decide whether waterproof protection is required;
- protection of yourself – use the same degree of protection (apron/gloves) as you would do whilst the person was alive and always be prepared for unexpected release of fluid from the bladder, bowel, mouth and any open wounds. Infection risk is the same as when someone was alive;
- their final resting place – this can be a bed, table, coffin … or anything flatish;
- moving the body - consider placing an extra sheet under their body to assist with moving. It may be possible to borrow a sliding sheet from nurses. A body can be moved whilst wrapped in a sheet - it takes 6 people to move a 15st/95kg body so take care of moving & handling risks.

RECOMMENDED PREPARATIONS

These relate to body fluids and controlling odour over the coming days. If there is no smell from body fluids around their body and you know that the person's body is not going to be in the home for more than 48 hours then there is no need to do anything you are uncomfortable with.

Dealing with Body Fluids

When turning someone's body, always place a towel or absorbent pad under the face in case any fluid leaks from their mouth.

Even if someone has not recently taken in food or fluids they can still release faeces, vomit or, more commonly, urine. They may also release a little fluid through their mouth and nose. This is normal and just needs to be cleaned up.

You will need:

- soap, water and washcloths. Wet wipes or cleansing foam may be helpful.
- towels for drying and for covering exposed areas of the body
- continence pad or towel for under the pelvis
- scissors or syringe if there is a catheter in place.

1. With a continence pad or towel under their pelvis, press gently on their tummy to release urine.
2. Place a towel or pad beside their face, on the side you will turn it towards.
3. Turn their body well over on its side to check for faeces and to release fluid from their mouth.
4. Clean soiled areas.
5. Secure a clean continence pad or towel to absorb faeces and urine and turn back.
6. Clean away any fluid released from their mouth.
7. Elevate the head on two pillows to minimize any further fluid seepage from the mouth.

To remove a urinary catheter, cut the tube with scissors. You can then either pull the rest of the tube gently out of the body or leave it in the body.

Cleaning their mouth

You will need:

- toothbrush, mouth sponge, cotton bud or a piece of gauze wrapped around a gloved finger.
- a glass of mouthwash, or water with antibacterial essential oils – eg tea tree or lavender.
- lip balm, Vaseline or oily cream.

1. Clean any fluid or mucus out of their mouth, replacing the cleaning fluid several times if necessary.
2. Take your time to thoroughly clean their gums, tongue, teeth and back of the mouth.
3. Once clean, wipe over their mouth surfaces again with the cleaning fluid. This helps to reduce odour.
4. Gently smooth lip balm, Vaseline or oily cream to help prevent drying out.

Covering wounds

Cover any wounds. If someone has been nursed at home with wounds then waterproof dressings will very likely be available – use these to cover the wound. It needs to be well sealed rather than neat. Contact community nurses for advice and dressings if necessary. Alternatively buy some from a chemist/supermarket.

Pacemakers/ Implants

If the person is going to be cremated it is very important that implants such as pacemakers or ICDs are removed. They are usually visible as a hard lump under the skin above the heart but may be in other areas. Check with the crematorium about any implants if necessary.

If you feel able, it is possible to remove a pacemaker by making an incision in the skin where you can feel the pacemaker, take out the device and cut the wires. Otherwise, you can ask a doctor or funeral director to assist.

DESIRABLE PREPARATIONS

It is not essential to close the eyes or mouth or replace dentures. However, most people will instinctively want to do this. If this is to be done then it is usually best to do it in the first few hours after the person's last breath and before their body becomes stiff with rigor mortis.

If you know that their body will be washed and/or clothes changed it is usually best to do the washing/dressing first and do these preparations afterwards. Alternatively, you could do these preparations while decisions about washing/dressing are being made.

Closing their Eyes

Bear in mind that it is not always possible to close eyes fully. It is not a problem unless it is disturbing someone – in this case, find a handkerchief or small cloth to cover their face. (Alternatively, contact a funeral director who can insert eye caps.) Try these steps

1. Gently close the eyelids with the side of your finger and hold gently for about 10 seconds.

If this doesn't work then,

2. Place a small bag of rice/ seeds or an eye relaxation bag over the eyes for a couple of hours, or
3. Place a tiny piece of cotton wool or vaseline under the eyelids.

Placing anything heavy on the eyelids can leave marks and indents. Gently rubbing oil or oily cream onto the eye lids can help stop them drying out.

Replacing Dentures

This can feel challenging but is often important to people - check about their wishes. If this is necessary, it needs to be done before their body becomes stiff. We recommend you do not try to do it without denture fixative.

1. Clean the mouth thoroughly.
2. Rinse the dentures in mouthwash or water with antibacterial essential oil eg lavender or tea tree.
3. Apply denture fixative generously to the dentures.
4. Insert the dentures into the mouth and press firmly into place.
5. Check the dentures are secure. If they are not, leave them out.

Closing their mouth

Bear in mind that it is not always possible to close the mouth fully. It is not a problem unless it is disturbing people. In this case, find a handkerchief, scarf or small cloth to cover the face. Alternatively, a funeral director can stitch or glue the mouth closed. Try these steps

1. Place a pillow under the person's head to tilt the head slightly forwards, or
2. Place a rolled-up hand towel under their chin to gently push it upwards.

   Keep in place at least 15 minutes, or until rigor mortis sets in.

Tying a soft scarf or bandage under their chin and around the top of their head can leave marks on their skin. Smoothing out creases where it touches their face and not tying too tightly can help to reduce this.

Gently rubbing lip balm, Vaseline, oil or oily cream onto lips can help stop them drying out.

WASHING & DRESSING THEIR BODY

Washing and dressing the body can be an opportunity to take time to honour the person who has taken their last breath and to make a meaningful connection with them and those helping you to do this for them.

There is no right or wrong way to wash and dress their body – it may not be necessary to wash their body at all depending on people's views and wishes and when it was last washed. This is not much different from giving a bed bath to someone who is unconscious. It is easier if you, or someone who is helping, has experience of this as there are safe techniques for moving someone's body in bed.

Our main recommendation is to follow your instincts about what is needed. Here are a few tips.

Rigor mortis

After 4-6 hours their muscles will usually become stiff due to rigor mortis - this wears off after 1-2 days and then their body will always be floppy. It is easier to wash and dress either before or after rigor mortis, while their body is not stiff, but if necessary, muscles can usually be massaged to move as required. You will not cause damage if you are gentle.

Hair

1. If hair has been washed recently then it is not necessary to wash it again
2. If washing is necessary it is best to do this first, and we recommend using dry shampoo powder or a dry shampoo cap.
3. Be mindful of the person's usual hairstyle.

Shaving

1. Use plenty of shaving oil or cream.
2. Take care not to cause razor burn as this can leave marks on the face.

Washing

1. be mindful of anyone who is helping you
2. depending on your relationship to the person who has died, and anything you know about the risk of infection, consider wearing gloves and/or an apron to protect yourself from body fluids. The infection risk is the same as when they were alive – no more, or different.
3. *with permission*, consider cutting clothes to ease their removal
4. if they are available, add antibacterial essential oils to the washing water – lavender, sage or rosemary are good, tea tree is often too strong smelling.
5. Consider massaging the skin with oil/essential oils – frankincense is a good option here.

You may want to thank or bless parts of the body as you tend to them ….. the mouth for all it has said, the hands for all they have held.

Dressing

1. before dressing, consider cooling options and be ready to place cool packs around their torso if that is your chosen option
2. *with permission*, consider cutting any clothes up the middle of the back to the collar (leaving the collar intact). This helps to place them more easily over the head and around the body.
3. After dressing, keep their head raised and tilted slightly forwards, with an extra pillow if necessary. This helps to prevent any fluid from coming out of the mouth.

ONGOING CARE

You have now completed laying out the person who has taken their last breath. Their body needs to be taken care of until they leave home for the last time. Ongoing attention is recommended to cooling their body and controlling odour and flies.

You will also likely want to attend to the ambience in the room. Be guided by what you knew about the person who has died, the people around now and what is available. You may want around the body: flowers, candles, soft lighting, a bible or other appropriate symbols.

COOLING

The reason for cooling their body is to delay the natural decomposition process which may lead to odour and noticeable changes in the body. It is not always necessary so if you are not keen to do this or it is going to be difficult in some way, seek our advice. The aim is to simulate a mortuary fridge – easily possible at home. Their body will have been cooling down since their last breath: your options are cooling the room and/or cooling their body. There are advantages and disadvantages to both.

Cooling the Room

Air conditioning units can be obtained on weekly hire from tool hire shops for this purpose.

Advantages – less ongoing work to do around the body,

Disadvantages – cost (prob £100-£150, depending on timescale), and the room can be uncomfortable for people sitting with the body.

Cooling their Body Directly

Advantages – it is a practical task which is meaningful for some people, especially carers

Disadvantages – the people available to help may not want such closeness to the body.

The easiest way is to use picnic cool packs, available from a larger supermarket or online. How many you need depends on the size of the person and the size of the packs – 8-10 would usually be ample.

1. Freeze the cool packs
2. Wrap them individually, or in twos, in a pillowcase or towel to absorb condensation.
3. Place packs on the chest and tummy areas and place one under either side of the torso, tucking underneath above the waist as far as possible.
4. Check daily if changes are required and replace packs with frozen ones if necessary.

Controlling Flies

Flies lay eggs which can turn into larvae within 2 days. Whilst this is potentially a problem, it is not a big concern as simple measures can prevent this:

- advise people around to be aware of flies entering the room,
- apply Cedarwood essential oil or insect repellent around the body,
- use a room diffuser to mask any fly-attracting odour
- keep windows and doors closed as much as possible
- tape an insect net over open windows (<£5 online)
- cover the face with a handkerchief or cloth sprinkled with insect repellent when no-one is with the body.

Controlling Odour

Odour could come from either bacterial activity in the body or from fluids like faeces, leaking from the body. This is rarely a problem, especially in people who have died after not eating and drinking for some time. This risk can be minimised by the following attention:

- minimising the fluids left in the body - during the preparations, pressing on the tummy to remove urine/ faeces and turning the body to remove fluid from the stomach/lungs/mouth,
- thoroughly cleansing the mouth
- ensuring a continence pad is neatly fitted to absorb urine and faeces,
- keeping the body cool,
- applying essential oils mixed in carrier oil to the body. Frankincense, sage, lemon or lavender is good as preventative– other flowery scents like rose can make the odour worse.
- sprinkling 'Thieves oil' around the body and perhaps in a room diffuser. This is a useful mix of essential oils available online which is not for use as a preventative but can counteract an odour in the unlikely event that it develops.

… and finally

- call for help if you have any concerns at all
  – either Pushing Up the Daisies 0300 102 4444 or a funeral director.
- you can change your mind at any time if it doesn't feel right at some point to have the person's body at home,
- expect changes in their skin colour and appearance,
- you will know by the smell, just as with the living, if there are body fluids requiring attention,
- if any
- keep flies out of the room as much as possible,
- check and replace the cooling packs daily, if used,
- sit together - read, talk, sing and keep each other company

HELPFUL POINTS

COOLING
Use picnic freezer blocks, gel packs, techni-ice
Freeze plenty beforehand
Wrap in a towel/pillow case to reduce condensation
Room cooling 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
Cut a urinary catheter with scissors
and pull gently (some urine may come out)

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 dressing
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, towel under chin, scarf around head
Try bag of rice over eyes, small piece of cotton wool under eyelid, or vaseline between lids

FLIES
(maggots hatch within 2 days)
Keep mouth/ nose well covered
Cedarwood oil around the body
Cover open windows with mesh

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 coffin weight)

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

NOTES:

Pushing up the Daisies

This manual was prepared
to accompany our online course
After the Last Breath.

More detailed information is available in the book
Slow Down When Someone Dies
by Lin Carruthers and Kate Clark.

For further information

www.pushingupthedaisies.org.uk

0300 102 4444

admin@pushingupthedaisies.org.uk

This manual was produced by Pushing Up the Daisies SC046808