

6. Death: Sudden, Expected or Unexpected

Death and Dying Matters

These information sheets have been created to demystify some beliefs and misconceptions around dying, death and funerals. They are designed to inform and empower individuals as well as communities, by providing practical information to help make better decisions and more considered choices in relation to end of life matters. This is not anything new, rather a return to a traditional approach, where families and friends are involved at every stage. Choices may be influenced by culture, beliefs, community, finances or sustainability issues.

These sheets may assist you to:

- better understand what is involved in the process of dying, death and bereavement
- participate more fully in any of the stages
- complete the relevant and important legal paperwork
- talk to others about your or their wishes and needs
- clarify your or their instructions around dying and after death
- create a more meaningful funeral to honour and celebrate a life
- have an easier and healthier bereavement

As we all know, death is certain, although the time and place are often uncertain. **Sudden or unexpected death** can occur from illness, natural causes, accidents, or someone taking their own life. Sometimes the body does not appear until some time later, or the circumstances may be unknown, or the body may never be located. **Expected death** can also occur from illness, natural causes or an accident, where there is a delay involved. All call for a different understanding.

You may believe or take comfort in the idea that ‘something’ leaves the physical body at death: a soul, spirit, individual essence, energy or consciousness. You may not believe this. What often becomes clear for people when sitting with or viewing the body for a while, is that the person you knew is not there any longer, the physical body is an empty shell.

We encourage age appropriate honesty with children. Do not exclude them, thinking that this will shelter or protect them. Be appropriate, be kind, and don’t lie to them. Sometimes if they are not told the truth they can believe they are in some way responsible. They will know something is wrong or out of place, they will feel, process and behave within their own capacity, help them to do this well.

Once the person has died, the Advance Health Care Plan or Enduring Guardianship documents are no longer valid. The Will is now valid, and the executor(s) of the Will has the legal right to make decisions regarding the body, funeral and disposal, though usually it is the next of kin who make these decisions.

With an expected death, it is not necessary for a doctor to be present. You will have kept them informed but there is no set time that you must notify the doctor, so if someone dies in the evening or during the night, you may want to just spend extra calm time with the body and call the doctor in the morning, or a few hours later, when you are ready.

With a sudden or unexpected death there may be additional shock, distress or trauma for you as the people left behind. In some cases you may be notified by the police. Prepare yourself by imagining this possibility.

If you discover the body, try to stay calm, take deep breaths, take hold of something, sit or kneel down. If you feel the need or are able to, check for signs of life, such as a pulse, pupil response and temperature. If there is a possibility to resuscitate them, attempt CPR or call an ambulance, and try to stay as calm as you can. If they are clearly dead and unable to be resuscitated, you may just want to be still. This is a time and an experience you will only have once. Consider what needs to happen next. Take some time to be with your own feelings and the reality of the situation. This may be minutes or even hours. Continue to try to stay as calm as you can.

Do not pick up the phone until you are ready. Depending on the circumstances you may choose to call loved ones, a doctor, an ambulance, the police or a funeral director. Once this course of action is taken, it can be difficult to stop it. In a short amount of time, you could find the place full of strangers asking questions, and the body whisked away. You may want to delay this until you have said your goodbyes, and you are ready to deal with this next stage.

If a person has not seen a doctor in the previous three months, or they have had an operation in the previous three months, an autopsy may be required. If the cause of death needs to be determined the body may be taken by ambulance to a hospital morgue and undergo an autopsy. This can take two to three days to occur. In some cases the family may be given a choice, and can request no autopsy.

An autopsy is a procedure where the body is surgically opened by the Coroner, by a series of cuts. The organs are removed, examined to work out the cause of death and usually placed back in, and then the body is stitched back up. This can involve a cut to the hairline, and through the centre of the torso. The body can still be viewed, but we suggest you have someone explain the condition of the body before hand so that you know what to expect. You could also have someone accompany you for your first viewing, allowing them to leave you as you get used to it and shock abates.

If there has been an autopsy it is still possible to:

- bring the body home
- wash and dress the body yourself
- sit, be with or hold a vigil with the body
- have an open coffin at the funeral

Did you know?

- You can look after a body at home
- Washing, preparing and dressing a body yourself
- A body can be buried in a shroud without a coffin
- You can build and decorate your own coffin, though it has to meet certain specifications so it can fit in the cremator or grave and be weight bearing
- Cardboard coffins are legal and used in many countries in the world
- A coffin can be lined with a soft absorbent liner, rather than plastic
- You can drive a body in your own vehicle from a home or hospital, to the funeral and crematorium or cemetery

These things are all possible, and nothing new; rather, they are the way things were traditionally done.

If a doctor has been attending the person recently and knows the cause of death, they will issue a death certificate, so no need for an autopsy. In these cases, it is then possible to move the body from the home straight to the cremator or the grave, with the correct paperwork completed and due procedure followed. However, usually there is a ceremony.

With an expected death the person is usually at home or hospital. When life is gone, especially if you have been caring for or attending them, together with any sadness there may also be relief that their suffering is over. Being with the body can be a beneficial experience. Take time to just be with the body. Do not call anyone straight away, unless you want to. You may want family and friends to come and be there too.

When you are ready you must notify a doctor to come and a death certificate must be issued. If you are using a funeral director (preferably chosen in advance), call them when you are ready. Do not rush; your time with the body can be precious and cannot be had again. The funeral director will take the body away to keep it in cold storage, and await your further instructions.

Being with the body can be a beneficial experience. If you want to keep it at home, it is legal in NSW to do so for up to 5 days. This is a long time. Often people will keep the body between twelve and forty-eight hours. It is **vital that it be kept cold** (preferably at -5°C) as it will begin to deteriorate otherwise. This can be done with ice, dry ice, frozen containers, or a refrigerated cold plate. (Cold plates are commonly used in some countries and are being used here in some areas.) **If you want to do this, find out more in advance so you know what is involved.**

You can also wash and dress the body yourself, before it is taken away. This may also include closing the eyes and mouth, and watching out for any body fluids, though there may not be any. **If you want to do this, find out more in advance so you know what is involved.**

If a person is dying in hospital, tell the nursing staff if you intend to spend some quiet time with the body once death has occurred. You can also take the body home and care for it there. This time can be very precious. It can allow you to rest, appreciate what has happened, come to terms, and see clearly that life has gone. This time cannot be had again.



Natural Death
Care Centre



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The Natural Death Care Centre and Tender Funerals are both not-for-profit organisations based in NSW, committed to informing, educating and empowering individuals, communities, and medical and health professionals. We have a natural, holistic and respectful approach to dying, death, disposal, ceremony and bereavement.