

What to expect when someone dies at home

Dying is different for every person and for every family/whānau. It is important to do whatever feels right during this time. In our multicultural society, it is important we accept the traditions surrounding death that exist in our different cultures. This information sheet gives practical advice relating to the point of death and what follows.

How will I know that death has occurred?

At the time of death:

- the person will not respond when you speak to them
- they will not breathe or move
- their eyes may be open or closed, and their jaw will relax
- the colour of their skin will become paler and cooler.

No matter how much you prepare for it, death arrives in its own time and in its own way.

What do I do now?

It is important that you do everything in your own time and carry out any other plans or arrangements you have made. Take as much time as you need to say your goodbyes.

- If you don't want to be alone, contact a relative or friend to join you.
- You do **not** have to call an ambulance or the police. It is helpful to note the time of death.
- There may be family/whānau and friends to inform; you may want to delegate this task.
- Contact your GP and/or your community nurse; this can wait until morning if the person died overnight. Your GP must see them in person before they can sign a death certificate – you will be able to get a copy of the death certificate from the funeral director later.
- It is often possible for the deceased person to stay at home for a length of time to allow friends and relatives to come and say their goodbyes.
- Turn off room heaters and electric blankets and keep the room as cool as possible. This is particularly important if you do not wish the person to be embalmed.
- It is not necessary to wash them but, if you wish, you can sponge their skin and face and replace any dentures they might usually wear. If this is not possible, place the dentures in a container and ensure the funeral director receives them. (**Note:** the deceased person's body will become stiff over time, so it is important to do this sooner rather than later.)

Funeral arrangements

- Contact a funeral director of your choice to notify them of the death.
- You will need to advise them as to your choice of cremation or burial.
- The funeral director will arrange with you to collect the deceased person. They will arrange to meet you at the place where the person is lying or at the funeral home as per your wishes.

Other people you may also need to contact over the next few days include:

- the deceased person's solicitor or executor of the will
- a priest, vicar, minister (if applicable)
- Work and Income (WINZ) (if the person was receiving a benefit)
- social services, e.g., home help, personal carers
- any insurance companies the person may have been using, e.g., home and contents insurance or health insurance
- Inland Revenue (IRD)
- New Zealand Post (NZ Post) to arrange a redirection on the person's mail
- the person's power/phone/gas companies.

Acknowledgement to Ministry of Health for sharing resource

What to expect after death at home - continued

Grieving

When someone close to you dies, you may experience many emotions including:

- **sadness** - for the loss in your life
- **shock/disbelief** - at what has happened, a sense of unreality
- **anger** - at what has happened and possibly towards whatever caused it
- **relief** - that your loved one's suffering is now over and that you are also now free from the worry and exhaustion of providing care
- **guilt** - that there are things you did or didn't do well enough
- **loneliness** - as you miss your loved one's company and support.

Sometimes these feelings are accompanied by physical symptoms, e.g., lack of energy, upset stomach, loss of appetite, headaches, difficulty sleeping. These feelings and physical effects are part of the normal response to the death of someone close and are part of the grieving process.

Things you can do to help with your grief

- Express your emotions and let your family share in your grief.
- Remember that you need time to rest, think, exercise, sleep and eat.
- The bad days will come and go; be gentle with yourself when they occur.
- Remember that children experience similar feelings and need to share their grief. Encourage children to continue with their usual activities and routines, but be guided by your child's individual needs and circumstances.
- People grieve differently - some people want to keep busy, some want to talk, others do not.

When to seek professional help with your grief

Many feelings and physical effects are a normal part of grieving. However, you may wish to seek professional help if:

- your emotions or physical symptoms are making it difficult to manage day-to-day tasks
- you are feeling exhausted, anxious, suicidal, depressed, continually stressed, helpless or are experiencing uncontrollable anger or sleeplessness
- you are becoming dependent on drugs or alcohol
- you are becoming withdrawn and finding it difficult to speak to or spend time with others
- you are finding it difficult to cope at work
- you notice major ongoing behavioural changes in your children/teenagers
- you have little desire to get involved in activities that you once enjoyed.

Talk with your GP or community nurse about the options available to you. They will refer you or your child to a specialist if necessary.