

When a child dies at home

This information sheet is to explain what to do after your child has died at home. It is important that you feel prepared for this difficult time and have the support of others.

How do I know when my child has died?

For some people, this may be the first time witnessing someone die and understandably this can cause anxiety. Below is some information that may help you to understand what to expect at the time of death.

Your child has died when their heart stops. This usually follows a few minutes after breathing stops. Babies and children can take a long time between breaths (up to 15 minutes) and then start breathing again for a time. Usually death will occur shortly after this occurs.

What should you do?

If your child has stopped breathing, you are not required to call your Care Team or family doctor straight away.

You may wish to take time after their death to perform a special ritual or call family and friends to be with you. For some families, there are important cultural or religious practices relating to the care of the child around the time of death.

Spending time with your child

You may wish to cuddle your child or hold their hand after they have died. You may wish to wash and dress them in different clothes to reflect their personality for friends and family that come to say goodbye.

If possible, have your child in a room with air-conditioning to make the room as cool as possible. It can be helpful to position your child lying straight in the bed after you have finished cuddling or holding them, as the body becomes more difficult to move over a period of time after death.

In most situations, a health professional (doctor, ambulance officer or suitably trained nurse) will need to come to your home and verify in writing that your child has died. When you and your family are ready, you will need to phone your Care Team or GP to arrange this. You should have been given their contact details in case you need support (including after hours). They will come to check for a

heartbeat, listen for breathing and check your child's pupils. After this check, the doctor or nurse will confirm that your child has died and the time of death. There is paperwork that will be completed by the health professional who will confirm your child's death. This paperwork will need to be given to your chosen funeral director.

Coroner's cases

Parents/carers often ask if they need to notify the police when their child dies. This is generally not required because the child's death was expected and the result of a known illness. However, in some cases, your child's death may be reportable to the Coroner and the police will need to be called. Your Care Team will have been able to advise you about this in the lead up to your child's death. If your child's death is reportable to the Coroner, you will not be able to move your child's body or remove any clothing or medical devices until the police advise that you can.

Funeral director

You may have already made contact with a funeral director in the days before your child dies. This can be helpful so that less explanation is needed at the time of your child's death. When you are ready, contact the funeral director who will come to your home. Your child can stay at home for some hours if you wish, especially if you would like friends and relatives to come and say their goodbyes. Some families want to keep their child at home for as long as possible before the funeral. If this is something you would like to do, speak to your funeral director about the options. Funeral directors are on call 24 hours a day. There may be additional costs for work outside normal business hours. The funeral directors are not legally permitted to transport a person's body until there is a written verification of death.

It is important for families to be prepared for what happens when the funeral director comes to your home. When the time comes you may be overwhelmed by emotions. It is important to have the support of others at this time.

Some funeral companies may place the person who has died into a bag, to comply with Workplace Health and Safety Regulations, before placing them on a stretcher and taking them to the vehicle. If this is the case, you can ask that the bag be left open while your child leaves your home. An alternative would be for someone to carry the child to the funeral director's car and place them on the stretcher. Privacy should also be considered regarding where the funeral director parks their vehicle so that it is close to the entry of your home.

You may wish for your child's favourite toy or blanket to go with them. These special items can be kept for you by the funeral director.

If you would like to, you can visit your child at the funeral home before the funeral. Your funeral director will be very willing to discuss this with you.

For further guidance regarding planning a funeral, please see the information sheet:

- Arranging a funeral for a baby
- Arranging a funeral for a child or adolescent

