

When a child dies in hospital

It is important to be prepared for what needs to happen and have the support of others when a child dies. This information sheet explains what to do after your child dies in hospital.

How do I know when my child has died?

For some people, this may be the first time witnessing someone die. Below is information that may help you to understand what to expect at the time of death to help reduce some of the anxiety experienced during this difficult time.

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.

When you are ready, a doctor or nurse from your Care Team will come to listen for a heartbeat, breathing and check your child's pupils to confirm that they have died and the time of death.

Your Care Team will arrange for the documentation required at the time of death to be completed. This paperwork will be given to your funeral director via the hospital mortuary.

Spending time with your child

You and your family may spend time with your child on the ward after they have died. Ask the nursing staff how long you can stay. You may wish to wash your child or dress them in different clothes. Your Care Team can assist you with this if you wish.

You may want to contact family and friends to inform them of your child's death. If you would like assistance in making these telephone calls please speak to your Care Team.

Your Care Team on the ward will let you know when your child needs to be moved to the hospital mortuary. It may be possible to spend time with your child at the mortuary during business hours. Please speak to your Care Team about arranging this. You can also choose to view your child again at the funeral home.

You may wish for certain things that were special to your child to be placed with them after they have died. This may include their blanket or favourite toy. These special items can be kept for you by the funeral director.

Cultural, spiritual and religious needs around the time of death

For some families, there are important cultural or religious practices relating to the care of their child around the time of death. It is better to discuss your needs with your Care Team prior to your child's death or as soon as possible after they have died. Your Care Team will do their best to support your needs wherever possible.

If you would like pastoral care support at this time please ask your Care Team to contact the chaplaincy service of your choice. You are welcome to bring a support person, minister, priest, rabbi, Imam, doula or spiritual advisor from your own faith or community.

Special considerations

Parents/carers often ask if the police or the coroner will be notified when their child dies in hospital. This is generally not required because the child's death was expected and the result of a known illness.

In some cases it is a legal requirement for a child's death to be reported to the coroner therefore the police will need to be called. Your Care Team will advise you about this in the lead up to your child's death. If the 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.

Leaving the hospital

Packing up your child's belongings when preparing to leave the hospital after their death can be a daunting task. Extended family and friends often want to help you at this time as do your Care Team. Please let them know if you would like their assistance in collecting all your belongings and getting them home to you.

You may feel overwhelmed by emotions when the time comes to leave the hospital. This is a very normal response and it is important to have the support of others at this time.

You may also require someone else to drive you home. A combination of tiredness, shock and distress can make this a difficult time to drive. If you do not have someone who can drive you home, you may wish to leave your car at the hospital and get a taxi home, with plans to come back later to collect your car.

Funerals

You may have already made contact with a funeral director in the days before your child dies. This pre-planning can be helpful so that you don't need to explain so much at the time of your child's death. When you are ready, contact the funeral director who will make all the necessary arrangements with the hospital directly.

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



NSW Paediatric Palliative
Care Programme



The Sydney children's
Hospitals Network



The Sydney children's
Hospitals Network



Children, Young People & Families

