

## After Death: What Happens Next

A practical and compassionate guide for families in the hours and days after a loved one dies.

### 1. The First Moments

There is no rush.

You can sit with your loved one. Take as much time as you need. Light a candle. Say a prayer. Play their favorite music. Read a poem. Hold their hand one last time. This time belongs to you.

Many families find these quiet moments after death to be sacred. There is no one waiting, no clock running. The body will not change significantly in the first few hours. You are allowed to simply be here.

#### Take Your Time

Some families wash and dress their loved one, brush their hair, or place meaningful objects nearby. Others simply sit in silence. There is no right or wrong — do whatever brings you comfort.

### 2. Who to Call

#### IMPORTANT

Call HOSPICE first — not 911.

If you call 911, paramedics are legally required to attempt resuscitation — this is not what your loved one wanted. Their comfort-focused wishes are honored by calling the hospice team first.

When you are ready, call the hospice agency. There is a 24-hour phone line. Here is what will happen:

1. The hospice nurse will come to you. They will arrive to confirm the death (pronounce), which is required before the funeral home can be contacted.
2. The nurse will notify the physician. The hospice physician (or the attending doctor) will sign the death certificate.
3. The funeral home will be called. When you are ready — not before — the nurse will help coordinate with the funeral home or cremation service you have chosen. If you haven't chosen one yet, the hospice team can help.

4. Medications will be accounted for. The nurse will document and help dispose of any remaining controlled medications.

### 3. What to Expect With the Body

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After death, the body will begin to change. These changes are natural and expected:

- The skin will become cool to the touch.
- Color will gradually drain from the face and extremities.
- The jaw may relax and the mouth may open slightly.
- You may notice the skin taking on a waxy appearance.

All of this is completely natural. If you wish, you may bathe and dress your loved one. Some families find this to be a meaningful and tender act of final care — washing their face, combing their hair, dressing them in something they loved. This is your choice, and the hospice nurse can assist you.

## 4. Practical Steps in the First 24-48 Hours

You do not need to do everything at once. Here is a general guide for what happens in the first day or two. Take it at your own pace.

- Hospice equipment pickup — The hospice agency will arrange to pick up the hospital bed, oxygen equipment, wheelchair, and other medical supplies, usually within 24 hours. You do not need to do anything — they will coordinate this.
- Return or dispose of unused medications — Return controlled medications (opioids) to the hospice nurse, or dispose of them safely. You can flush most hospice medications or bring them to a pharmacy medication take-back program. The nurse will guide you.
- Notify close family and friends — Make calls or ask a trusted friend or family member to help spread the word. You don't have to do this alone.
- Contact the funeral home or cremation service — If not already done, reach out to the funeral home. They will guide you through arrangements and come to transport your loved one when you're ready.
  - Locate important documents — When you're able, begin gathering: the will or trust, life insurance policies, financial account information, Social Security number, and military discharge papers (DD-214) if applicable.

### Practical Advice

Accept help. When people say "let me know if you need anything," give them a specific task: make phone calls, bring food, pick up family from the airport, walk the dog. People genuinely want to help — let them.

## 5. The Death Certificate

The death certificate is a legal document that will be needed many times in the weeks and months ahead. Here is how it works:

- The hospice physician signs it. The doctor who was overseeing your loved one's care will certify the cause and manner of death.
- The funeral home files it. The funeral director submits the death certificate to the county or state vital records office.
- You will need multiple certified copies. Each bank, insurance company, government agency, and property office will require their own certified copy.

#### How Many Copies?

Order 10-12 certified copies of the death certificate. You will need them for: banks, insurance companies, the Social Security Administration, the DMV, property and deed transfers, retirement accounts, and veterans' benefits. It is easier and cheaper to order them all at once through the funeral home.

## 6. Bereavement Support

Your relationship with hospice does not end at death. Hospice provides 13 months of bereavement follow-up for the family, which may include:

- Phone calls from a bereavement counselor
- Home visits if desired
- Grief mailings with resources and support
- Support groups (in-person or virtual)
- Referrals to individual counseling if needed

#### Covered by Medicare

Bereavement services are part of the Medicare hospice benefit. There is no additional cost. You don't have to grieve alone — the hospice team is still here for you.

## 7. Be Gentle With Yourself

Grief has no timeline. There is no "right" way to grieve.

Some days you will feel okay. Some days the weight will feel unbearable. Some days you will laugh and then feel guilty for laughing. All of this is normal. All of it is grief.

You may feel relief — and that is okay too. Relief that their suffering has ended. Relief that the caregiving is done. Relief does not mean you didn't love them. It means you are human.

Be patient with yourself. Eat. Sleep. Let people help you. The love doesn't end here. It just changes shape.

Grief is not a problem to be solved. It is a journey to be honored. Take it one day — one hour — one breath at a time.

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### Sources

1. National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO) — <https://www.nhpco.org/>
2. Hospice Foundation of America — <https://hospicefoundation.org/>
3. CaringInfo — National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization — <https://www.caringinfo.org/>
4. Medicare.gov — Hospice Benefits — <https://www.medicare.gov/coverage/hospice-care>

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