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What To Do After Someone Dies

[Español](#)

What to do after someone dies depends on where the person died. If someone dies at [home](#), there is no need to move the body right away. If the person was in hospice, a plan for what happens after death will likely already be in place. If the person wasn't in hospice, talk with the doctor, local medical examiner (coroner), local health department, or a funeral home representative about how to proceed. You might want to have someone make sure the body is lying flat before the joints become stiff. This rigor mortis begins sometime during the first few hours after death.

When a loved one passes, some people want to stay in the room with the body; others prefer to leave. Some families want time to sit quietly with the body, console each other, and maybe share memories. This is the time for any special religious, ethnic, or cultural customs that are performed soon after death.



If your loved one died in a facility, such as a [hospital](#) or [nursing home](#), discuss any important customs or rituals with the staff early on, if possible. You could ask a member of your religious community or a spiritual counselor to come. If you have a list of people to notify, this is the time to call those who might want to come and see the body before it is moved.

Coping with Loss

When your spouse or loved one dies, your entire world may change. You may feel a variety of different emotions like anger, guilt, or sadness. Remember that everyone grieves differently and there is no sole right way to grieve. You may find that surrounding yourself with loved ones, joining a support group, or talking to a professional may help you [cope with loss](#).

Get a Legal Pronouncement of Death

As soon as possible, the death must be officially pronounced by someone in authority like a doctor in a hospital or nursing facility or a hospice nurse. This person also fills out the forms certifying the cause, time, and place of death. These steps will make it possible for an official death certificate to be prepared. This legal form is necessary for many reasons, including life insurance and financial and property issues.

Make Arrangements for After Death

If the person was in [hospice](#), a plan for what happens after death will already be in place. If death happens at home without hospice, try to talk with the doctor, local medical examiner (coroner), your local health department, or a funeral home representative in advance about how to proceed. You can also consider a home funeral, which is legal in most states.

Arrangements should be made to pick up the body as soon as the family is ready and according to local laws. This can be done by a funeral home or by the family themselves in most states. The hospital or nursing facility, if that is where the death took place, may help with these arrangements. If at home, you will need to contact the funeral home directly, make arrangements yourself, or ask a friend or family member to do that for you.

The doctor may ask if you want an autopsy. This is a medical procedure conducted by a specially trained physician to learn more about what caused the death. For example, if the person who died was believed to have [Alzheimer's disease](#), a brain autopsy will allow for a definitive diagnosis. If your religion or culture objects to autopsies, talk to the doctor. Some people planning a funeral with a viewing worry about having an autopsy, but the physical signs of an autopsy are usually hidden by clothing and other body preparation techniques.

What to Do Within A Few Weeks of Death

Over the next few weeks, you may want to notify a few places about your loved one's death. This may include:

- [The Social Security Administration](#). If the deceased was receiving Social Security benefits, you need to stop the checks.
- Life insurance companies. You will need a death certificate and policy numbers to make claims on any policies.
- Credit agencies. To prevent identity theft, you will want to send copies of the death certificate to three major firms: Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion.
- Banks and financial institutions. If your loved one left a list of accounts and passwords, it will be much easier to close or change accounts. You will need a copy of the death certificate if the person did not leave a list.

What about organ and brain donation?

At some time before death or right after it, the doctor may ask about donating organs such as the heart, lungs, pancreas, kidneys, cornea, liver, and skin. Organ donation allows healthy organs from someone who died to be transplanted into living people who need them. People of any age can be organ donors.

The person who is dying may have already said that he or she would like to be an organ donor. Some States list this information on the driver's license. If not, the decision has to be made quickly. There is no cost to the donor's family for this gift of life. If the person has requested a [Do Not Resuscitate \(DNR\) order](#) but wants to donate organs, he or she might have to indicate that the desire to donate supersedes the DNR. That is because it might be necessary to use machines to keep the heart beating until the medical staff is ready to remove the donated organs.

[Brain donation](#) is a separate process and registering as an organ donor does not mean you are choosing to donate your brain. If the person is registered as a brain donor, their point of contact will need to be notified within two hours after death.

Learn more about [organ donation resources for older donors](#), [advance care planning](#), and the [brain donation process](#).

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member@aarp.org

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804-377-3580

donatelifeamerica@donatelife.net

www.donatelife.net

The Living Bank

800-528-2971

info@livingbank.org

www.livingbank.org

Social Security Administration

800-772-1213

800-325-0778 (TTY)

www.ssa.gov

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