

What to expect after your baby dies

This information sheet is about what happens if your baby is stillborn or dies after birth.

IMPORTANT: This is general information only. Talk to your health care provider about your individual circumstances.

We understand this is a very difficult and sad time for you and your family. This brochure contains important information to be discussed at this time.

What is grief and how long will it last?

Grief is a reaction to loss. There is no right or wrong way to feel. Each parent's grief journey is different and finding the support you need is important.

Strong feelings are very common. Deep sadness, anxiety, fear, anger, guilt, helplessness and despair are just some of the emotions you might experience. Physical reactions such as tiredness, loss of appetite and difficulty concentrating or remembering things are also very common.

Some parents say that their grief is stronger at some times than others. For many parents, the death of their baby brings a grief that is unexpected, deep, intense, overwhelming and long lasting.

Everyone is different and there is no 'right' time for grief to last. At times it might seem you will never feel 'normal' again.

Parents who have experienced a baby's death often recall many ups and downs before they began to enjoy life again. Sometimes this means creating a new 'normal'.

Allowing yourself the time and space to grieve and finding the support you need from others is important.

More information about grief is available at:
www.health.qld.gov.au/qcg

Can you spend time with your baby?

You can spend time with your baby. You can decide how long and how often you spend time with your baby. Your health care provider will talk to you about this.

Some parents find this time with their baby creates precious memories. The idea of seeing and holding your baby may seem hard or frightening at first, especially if you have never seen a dead body before. Many parents feel this way, but find spending time with their baby a much cherished experience.

If you are not sure about seeing your baby or are anxious about how your baby may look or feel, your health care provider can give you information, support and answer your questions. If you want, they will also be there with you when you see or hold your baby. If at first you decide not to see your baby, and then change your mind, you can still ask to see your baby. This can happen either at the hospital or before his/her funeral. You can see and hold your baby as often as you wish. Your baby will feel cold to touch.

Some parents have found that having time at home with their baby has helped to create special memories. Some have invited family and friends to meet their baby. To help you decide whether to take your baby home, your health care provider can give you more information about.

- looking after your baby's body
- release of your baby from hospital—forms will be completed
- legal requirements for birth and death registration and burial or cremation
- arranging travel for your baby to your home

What will happen with your baby's body?

Your health care provider may suggest that your baby has an autopsy. A hospital autopsy is an examination of a body after death. An autopsy may provide you with information about why your baby died. An information sheet about hospital autopsy is available at www.qld.gov.au/qcg

If your baby was stillborn at 20 weeks or more, or weighed 400 grams or more at birth, or died after birth the law in Queensland requires a burial or cremation. Your health care provider can give you more information about this .

How can you create memories?

You can create memories of your baby by:

- holding your baby
- spending time looking, cuddling, kissing or singing to your baby
- making footprints and handprints
- bathing your baby
- dressing your baby in special clothes or if your baby is very small you may like to wrap him or her in a special blanket or shawl
- taking photographs and videos of your baby (professional photography may be available)
- saving things that have been important to you during this time (e.g. the original shawl your baby was wrapped in, a lock of hair)—you may like to keep them in a special memory box
- introducing your baby to family and friends
- having a religious, naming or other ceremony
- having a funeral or other memorial ceremony to say goodbye to your baby

Your health care provider can help you to do many of these things and can tell you about other help that is available.

What are hospital mementos?

Your health care provider will help you keep special mementos of your baby like the tape measure used to measure your baby, your baby's cot name card and identification bracelet.

If you don't want to see these mementos while you are in the hospital, you may like to take them home, or give them to another family member or friend. You might find you are ready to look at them at a later time.

How do you tell your family and friends?

Telling family members and friends about the death of your baby can be difficult. You don't need to tell everyone immediately; you can tell people when you feel ready.

Family and friends may be waiting for news of the birth, and will probably have questions about the sex, weight and name of your baby. If you are not up to telling people your news, you might ask a close family member or friend to do this for you. You can help set the tone of the conversation with words like "I have some sad news".

It might be helpful to remind yourself that people react in different ways.

You might find that people are shocked and may not know what to do or say. At times their comments might seem unhelpful or even hurtful or there may be long silences. Some people might say things to try to make you feel better. Others may stay away or not contact you because they may not know what to say or do.

How do you tell your other children?

Telling other children in the family that a baby has died can be difficult. How and what you tell them will depend on their age, stage of development and their relationship with your baby. Children have different needs and will have different responses to the baby's death.

Your health care provider can help you with this.

What will happen with your breast milk?

Suppressing (drying up) your milk will usually cause your milk supply to gradually decrease. Limiting the amount of milk you express, wearing a firm bra, using cold packs and taking medication for pain if required will help.

Your health care providers will give you information and support for reducing your milk production and preventing engorgement (painful, overfull breasts), blocked ducts and mastitis.

Some women choose to express their milk and donate it to the Queensland Milk Bank to help sick and premature babies. Discuss this with your health care provider as this may not be possible for everyone.

Will you get follow up care?

You should have the usual post birth care after you go home from hospital. At your postnatal check (about six weeks after you gave birth) you can discuss any concerns or questions you have. If you need or want to you can see your healthcare provider before this. You will be given information about this before you go home from hospital.

Returning to the hospital or clinic where you had antenatal or birthing care may trigger strong emotions. If you don't feel comfortable with returning or wish to see another doctor, ask for different follow-up.

What costs are involved?

Costs vary depending on your choice of funeral director. Some funeral homes offer free or discounted services for stillborn babies. Your funeral director can confirm any costs with you.

Your baby's birth and death must be registered with the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages. If you would like a birth certificate, you will need to apply and pay for it. The funeral director will usually get the death certificate for you.

Other costs may include a cremation permit, floral tributes, celebrant/minister fee and newspaper notices.

Is there any financial support?

Parents of stillborn babies are usually eligible for the maternity allowance, maternity leave and bereavement payment. The forms to claim these may be available at your hospital or you can contact Centrelink for more information. The social worker will be able to help with these.

Comfort, support and information

Your friends, family, doctor and hospital staff can offer you comfort, support and information at this time.

SANDS (13 000 SANDS or 13 000 72637): provides support and information to parents and families who experience miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal and infant death www.sands.org.au

Pregnancy Loss Australia *formerly Teddy Love Club* (1800 824 240): A support program for bereaved families who have experienced loss through miscarriage, stillbirth, and termination of pregnancy for fetal abnormality or neonatal death. www.pregnancylossaustralia.org.au

Heartfelt (1800 583 768): a volunteer organisation of professional photographers who provide photographic memories to families. All services are provided free of charge www.heartfelt.org.au

SIDS and KIDS (1300 308 307): a 24 hour bereavement support and counselling to families who have experienced stillbirth or the sudden and unexpected death of a child, regardless of the cause www.sidsandkids.org

Centrelink (Family Assistance Office) (13 61 50): provides financial assistance including maternity allowances and bereavement payments www.humanservices.gov.au

Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages (Queensland) 1300 366 430

The registry records and maintains life event registrations in Queensland and issues life event certificates. www.qld.gov.au/law/births-deaths-marriages-and-divorces