

Spending  
the  
**last days**  
together



A Carer's Guide





## Contents

- 03 Making it easier
- 07 Tips to keep your loved one comfortable
- 13 What to expect as death approaches
- 20 How to arrange for death certification
- 25 What to do after obtaining the Certificate of Cause of Death (CCOD)
- 28 Grief and Bereavement
- 32 Reference and Resources



# Making it easier





Caring for someone who is dying is not an easy task. We understand that this is not an easy time for you and your family.

This guide is specially prepared to help your loved one spend the last days of his/her life in warmth and comfort.

Specially written for one with no clinical or nursing experience, this guide contains useful suggestions and instructions on basic caregiving skills.

Procedures for death certification and useful contact numbers are included for your convenience.



Most people prefer to spend the last days of their lives in warm, comfortable and familiar surroundings, and in the presence of their loved ones.

For a person who is nearing the end of his/her life, dying is often a slow process, lasting from several days to a week. But sometimes, it can happen in a few hours.





“There is no feeling more comforting and consoling than knowing you are right next to the one you love.”



# Tips to keep your loved one comfortable





Here are some tips on how to keep your loved one comfortable

## Environment

- Maintain a pleasant room atmosphere.
- Avoid using bright lights which may be glaring to the eyes.
- Play soothing music at low volume near the bedside. Music can create a sense of calm and serenity for your loved one.
- Sit and hold your loved one's hand. Gently massage or stroke his/her hands and feet. The sense of touch eases suffering and promotes comfort.





## Nutrition

- 🗨️ Your loved one does not require much calories at this stage. Offer food in small amounts but do not insist if he/she does not want to eat.
- 🗨️ Small chips of ice or frozen juice may be refreshing in the mouth if he/she can tolerate the cold.
- 🗨️ If your loved one is able to swallow, fluids may be given in small amounts by a syringe.

## Mouth Care

- 🗨️ Clean his/her mouth with wet cotton balls or moist swabs at least once or twice a day to keep mouth clean and moist.
- 🗨️ If your loved one wears dentures, it should be removed for cleansing.
- 🗨️ Apply lip balm if the lip is dry.
- 🗨️ If your loved one is conscious, offer ice-chips or sips of water to keep his/her mouth moist.



## Hygiene

- Sponge your loved one in bed to maintain hygiene and to promote comfort.

## Skin Care

- Gently turn your loved one every two to three hours to prevent bedsores arising from prolonged lying in one position (left → back → right).
- Elevate the head with pillows and gently turn his/her head to the side to avoid prolonged pressure on the ears.
- Apply normal saline eye drops twice a day to prevent dryness.





## Bowels & Bladder Care

- 🌿 Use barrier cream to prevent the skin from coming into contact with excretions.
- 🌿 Change the diapers when soiled to promote comfort.
- 🌿 Use wet wipes to cleanse the skin if soiled.

## Spiritual Support

- 🌿 Spiritual support from an organised religion or through your own spiritual beliefs and values can be helpful.





# What to expect as death approaches





By now, it would be obvious to you that your loved one is very frail and weak. He/She is now spending most of his/her time in bed and is asleep more often than not. He/She also shows no interest in food or drinks and there is hardly any food or fluid intake.







This is expected as the body systems wind down and the need for energy (metabolic rate) slows as the end draws near.

As death approaches:

- His/her conscious level will further deteriorate and he/she may subsequently lose consciousness totally.
- His/her pulse will get weaker and the hands and feet will become cool to the touch (a result of decreased blood circulation). Keep your loved one warm with a blanket but do not overheat him/her up.





- Breathing may look “laboured” and he/she may appear to be gasping.
- There may be pauses in the breathing that can last up to a minute or so.
- His/her complexion will become pale with a yellowish hue.





- Throat secretions may increase. These often collect in the back of the throat and cause gurgling sounds when the person breathes. Turning him/her to the side will help him/her breathe more easily.
- Other signs may include increased confusion, seeing people or things that no one else sees. Reassure your loved one if he/she becomes restless.





Occasionally your loved one may linger on despite signs of impending death. This may happen when he/she is trying to hold on to life, especially when he/she is uncertain if the ones left behind will be able to cope or if there is some unfinished business.

This can take place with much discomfort for him/her. What you can do is to reassure him/her that it is all right to let go.

In other words, give him/her the assurance to leave this world.





Death occurs when the breathing has stopped completely and the pulses are not felt any more. Other signs of death would include a cessation of the heartbeat, enlarged pupils, fixed position of the eyes, slightly opened eyelids, a relaxed jaw, a partially opened mouth and bowel or bladder soiling.



# How to arrange for death certification





## If you are at home

Upon discharge from hospital, you would have been given a memo stating your loved one's medical problems. The possible diagnosis as the cause of death will also be noted down. This will help the person issuing the Certificate of Cause of Death (CCOD) even if he/she has not seen your loved one before.

Signing of the CCOD can be arranged by the following ways:

- ☎ Call your family doctor who may know your loved one and is willing to make a home visit.
- ☎ Call the home hospice support team if your loved one is under their care.
- ☎ Call a casket company who may be able to arrange for a doctor to sign the CCOD.

## If you are in the hospital

You will be given a Certificate of Cause of Death (CCOD) by the hospital if the cause of death is known and the cause is natural, upon producing the identity documents of your loved one.



## What happens if the doctor is unable to certify the death of your loved one?

If the doctor is unable to certify the cause of death, your loved one will be sent to the Mortuary @ HSA (located at Block 9, Singapore General Hospital) in a Police Hearse.

You will be told when to go down to the Mortuary @ HSA (usually on the next day).

## What to bring to the Mortuary @ HSA

- 🌿 All available medical documents relating to your loved one.
- 🌿 All medications belonging to your loved one.
- 🌿 Identification papers of your loved one and the claimant's (e.g. NRIC / Passport / Certificate of Citizenship / Birth Certificate / FIN card).







## At the Mortuary @ HSA

The coroner will review the case and determine if an autopsy is required. The family will be informed of the coroner's decision and when to claim the body of their loved one.

### Mortuary @ HSA Opening Hours:

Mon to Fri	8.00am to 4.30pm
Sat, Sun & Public Holiday	8.00am to 12.30pm





# What to do after obtaining the Certificate of Cause of Death (CCOD)







## If you are at home

You or your relatives have to bring your loved one's CCOD and NRIC or Passport to any police station or neighbourhood police post to register the death.

## If you are in NUH

 You have to bring your loved one's CCOD and NRIC or passport to NUH Mortuary if it is within office hours:

Mon to Fri	8.30am to 5.00pm
Sat	8.30am to 12.00pm

 To register the death outside of office hours:  
You can proceed to NUH Emergency Department.

You can contact one of the casket companies from Association of Funeral Directors (Singapore) listed on NEA website.



## What to do if you wish to bury your loved one's body outside of Singapore?

A Coffin (Export) Permit is required to take the body of your loved one out of Singapore. The permit can be applied at either of the two Port Health Offices, which are open 24 hours daily.

### I. Port Health Office

4545 Jalan Bukit Merah  
Singapore 159466  
Tel : 6222 2585  
Fax : 6222 8543

### II. Airport Health Office

Singapore Changi Airport  
Tel : 6543 2515  
Fax : 6543 1973

Please bring the following documents for the issuance of the coffin permit.

- I. Certificate of Cause of Death (CCOD)
- II. Sealing Certificate of the coffin (available from funeral directors)
- III. Embalming Certificate (available from funeral directors)

# Grief and Bereavement





## Understanding Grief and Bereavement

Grief is a normal response to loss. Bereavement is the term used for the experience following the death of a loved one. Everyone experiences and expresses grief differently; examples of how grief may affect you includes:

- 🌱 Difficulty with sleep
- 🌱 Loss of appetite
- 🌱 Tiredness
- 🌱 Anxiety and panic
- 🌱 Crying, or generally feeling emotional
- 🌱 Thinking about your loved one, hearing their voice, expecting them to walk through the door

It is normal to find yourself going back and forth in the grief process. Everyone is different in how they grieve, and the hurt does lessen with time.

## Helping yourself in times of grief

- 🌱 Ask for help and accept help and support when offered
- 🌱 Find someone who cares, and with whom you may talk freely

*Article continued on page 30...*



Page 29 article continued...

- Express your feelings
- Look after your health
- Take time to remember the person
- Don't take on new responsibilities right away if you do not feel ready

## Helping others who are grieving

- Be there to offer support over time, even if this is simply by being silent
- Listen without judgement
- Offer help with the normal daily tasks
- Be patient with yourself and the person, remember we are all different
- Pay attention to warning signs of depression or suicide, seek professional help

## When grieving becomes difficult

Signs when professional help may be needed

- Overwhelmed by feelings or the opposite i.e. "feeling numb"





- ☞ Prolonged inability to recognise that loss has happened
- ☞ Depression and/or thoughts of suicide
- ☞ Self-neglect, or increased use of alcohol, drugs or risky behaviour
- ☞ Prolonged disturbance with sleep, appetite and usual family and/or work activities

## Bereavement support

### I. National University Hospital

Department of Medical Social Work:

Mon - Fri 9am - 5pm

Tel: 6772 5167

(Request to speak to your social worker )

### II. Counselling and Care Centre

Mon - Fri 9am - 5pm

Tel: 6536 6366

### III. HELP Family Service Centres

Mon - Fri 9am to 6pm

Tel: 6457 5188

### IV. Hospice Home Care Services

(Request to speak to your Hospice Nurse)

### V. Wicare

Mon - Fri 9am to 6pm

Tel: 6354 2475



## Other References and Resources

 **National Environment Agency**

NEA Customer Service Hotline  
1800 - 225 - 5632

 **Directory of Family Services**

National Family Service Centre Helpline  
1800 - 838 - 0100

“Do not measure your loss by itself; if you do, it will seem intolerable; but if you will take all human affairs into account you will find that some comfort is to be derived from them.”

~ Anonymous



Information is correct at time of printing (May 2015) and subject to revision without prior notice.

For updated information, refer to [www.nuh.com.sg](http://www.nuh.com.sg).

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