



When your child has died suddenly or unexpectedly - what happens next?

A guide for bereaved parents, families,
and carers

What happens if your child has died suddenly or unexpectedly?

The death of a baby or child is deeply upsetting, and we would like to offer you and your family our deepest sympathy at this sad time. A sudden or unexpected death will come as a shock. We are here to support you.

We hope this leaflet helps you to understand what will happen next. We realise that there is a lot of information to take in. Please speak to staff if you have questions or if we can help in any way.

Seeing and spending time with your child

You may wish to spend time with your child and staff will support you to do this in the ward or emergency department, or later in the hospital's bereavement suite. When a baby or child has died suddenly or unexpectedly, there may be some restrictions on how and when you can be with them, but we will do our best to be sensitive to your needs and wishes.

The role of the Procurator Fiscal and Police

We have a legal duty to report sudden, unexpected or unexplained deaths to the Procurator Fiscal.

The Procurator Fiscal will ask the police to investigate the circumstances of the death on their behalf. This will involve the police visiting the place where your child died and speaking to parents, carers, healthcare staff, and others who were involved. The questions can be upsetting, but a detailed investigation is important and necessary. The police may also need to take some of your child's things (such as bedding, bottles or medicines) to be examined. You will usually get these back once the investigations are complete.

If your child died at home, you may not be able to return there until the police have finished any investigations in the property. The police will explain this to you if it is necessary.

Try not to be alarmed by the police enquiries. This is the normal process for dealing with sudden deaths. They will be as sensitive as possible.

Post-mortem examination

The Procurator Fiscal may order a post-mortem examination to be carried out if the death is unexplained, or if there are any concerns about the circumstances or cause of your child's death.

The post-mortem examination will be carried out by a paediatric pathologist (a doctor who specialises in diagnosing conditions and causes of death in children). The examination will take place as soon as possible but your child may have to be transferred to another hospital if a specialist pathologist is not available locally.

Before the post-mortem examination, your child will have radiology investigations, usually x-rays, to look for any bone abnormalities. This is a standard procedure in all sudden unexpected deaths in children.

During the post-mortem examination the pathologist will examine your child internally and externally. This is done with the same care that would be taken if your child were having an operation. The pathologist will take samples of tissue and body fluids for further tests.

You should be able to see and hold your child after the post-mortem examination if you wish.

If you have any concerns or objections to post-mortem examination, you should speak to the doctor or police about this as soon as possible. The Procurator Fiscal will always treat your views with respect but unfortunately it is not always possible to comply with families' wishes. In some cases a post-mortem examination will still be needed to determine the cause of death.

Post-mortem results

If a post-mortem examination is carried out, the first results will usually be available within a few days. At this point the pathologist will issue a Medical Certificate of Cause of Death, although the certified cause may still be 'unascertained' (unknown) or 'provisional' until the results of further tests are available. This may take up to 6 months. The Procurator Fiscal will keep you updated. Once all their enquiries are complete, the Procurator Fiscal will write to you with the final results of their investigations and offer a meeting to answer any questions you may have.

Keepsakes and memory boxes

Making memories with your child can be very comforting. You may wish to take photographs, a lock of hair or hand and footprints. We will offer you support to create these precious keepsakes and a special memory box to keep them in.

In some cases, the Procurator Fiscal may ask that we do not take any locks of hair or prints until after the post-mortem examination has been carried out. In this case the pathology staff can help to obtain these keepsakes.

Registering the death and making funeral arrangements

Once the doctor or pathologist has issued the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (commonly known as the 'death certificate'), you will be able to register your child's death and make arrangements for their funeral. Depending on the circumstances, the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death may be brought to you by the police, or it can be given to your chosen funeral director when they take your child into their care.

Spiritual Care and Bereavement support

Our Spiritual Care service is here to support you. Hospital Chaplains offer spiritual care to all, regardless of faith or belief. They can also help you contact a representative from your own faith or belief community.

If you would like to speak to a member of the Spiritual Care team, please let us know and we can contact them on your behalf.

Contact details and information about other support services can be found in the *Useful contacts and information* leaflet in the Rainbow Pack.