

Nurse Aide: What to do When a Patient Dies at Home

Even if a family has prepared themselves for the death of its loved one, anyone present may react with emotion. Although the family may expect the death when a patient is on hospice, it can still be overwhelming and difficult to accept. It is important for the nurse aide to remain calm and caring.

HOW TO KNOW THAT DEATH HAS OCCURRED

- No breathing and heartbeat; check for pulse by listening to the heart with a stethoscope or feeling for a pulse in the neck for a full minute; listen, look and feel for breathing; check for absence of breathing by positioning your ear 3-4 inches above the patient's mouth and watching the chest for movements for a full minute; you can place your hand on the patient's chest to check for movements as well;
- No response to verbal commands or gentle shaking
- Bowels and/or bladder may empty
- Eyelids may be slightly open, and eyes fixed on a certain spot
- The jaw may relax causing the mouth to be slightly open
- Skin may look very blue, pale, and waxy

WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR THE DECEASED

- Be respectful when caring for the patient's body
- Close the eyes of the patient with a gentle hand
- If the patient has oxygen, turn it off
- Cover the patient with a light sheet up to below the shoulders
- Provide the family private time with the body
- Ask the family if they want you to reposition the patient or if they want things left as they are; if the family wants you to reposition the patient's body, place the body on its back with one pillow under the head; put the patient's dentures or other artificial parts in place as requested by the family.
- Continue any infection control procedures that have been advised before death when caring for the patient's body after death such as preventing leakage of fluids to prevent infection of family and others
- Take your cues from the family as to what they would feel is most helpful

Module 22 – End of Life Care Handout #4

- Follow any further instructions provided to you by the nurse. The nurse will take care of the removal of catheters and drains; however, the nurse may provide you with the instructions for the removal of catheter or drains so you can complete these tasks
- Follow organizational protocols for death pronouncement, notifications, medication disposal, and transfer of body

WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR THE FAMILY

- Let the family know that the patient's heart has stopped, you think the patient has died, and that you will call hospice or other health care personnel as appropriate
- Remain with the family until the nurse arrives or directed otherwise by the family
- Families may respond to death very differently. Some express grief loudly and openly, while others hardly react at all. It is very individualized. Respond to family members with compassion regardless of their response to the death of the patient
- Ask the family if they want to participate in providing postmortem care
- Be sensitive to family needs, at times a hug and close presence may be comforting, but for some this may be upsetting