

What to expect after a pregnancy loss or losing a baby

The members of your health care team are deeply sorry for your loss. As well as caring for you, we can help you make arrangements for your baby's care. You may have many questions about what to do. This booklet may answer some of your questions and your health care providers will give you more information and support.

Grieving

Grief is a normal, healthy, healing and loving response to the loss of a loved one. Each person feels grief in a different way. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.

You may:

- mourn for your baby deeply, a little, or somewhere in between
- feel tired, have headaches, lose your appetite or have trouble sleeping
- search for a reason why this happened

You and your partner may experience the loss differently. And you may not express your feelings in the same way.

Please talk with a health care provider if:

- the loss creates tension between you
 - either of you become overwhelmed by feelings of loss
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What can help?

Some parents who have experienced grief have found these things may bring comfort:

- seeing and holding your baby
- having your baby blessed or named
- creating memories of your baby
- getting support from others

Seeing and holding your baby

Many parents are comforted by contact with their baby. You can decide whether or not you would like to spend time with your baby.

- You can hold your baby right after birth or wait several hours before deciding to be with your baby. Your nurse may dress and bundle your baby first. If you wish, you can take part in this care. Stay with your baby as long as you want. You can share this time with your family or close friends.
- You may decide not to hold your baby and that is OK. You may prefer to just have pictures of your baby.

Parents make different choices and it is common for parents to change their decisions. We will support whatever decisions you make.

If your baby is very small, it may not be possible to tell the sex of the baby. Your health care providers will not be able to tell you. Further testing may confirm the baby's sex.

Having your baby blessed or named

The hospital chaplain or your faith/religious leader can bless or name your baby. This may be done in your hospital room or in another private room. If you would like to speak with the chaplain, please ask your nurse.

Creating memories of your baby

Many families find it helpful to have a keepsake of their baby. Your nurse will help you save mementos of your baby.

You may want to keep some or all of these things:

- photographs of your baby
- your baby's footprints and/or handprints
- your baby's identification bracelet
- information about your baby's birth
- the card from your baby's cot
- a naming certificate
- a tape measure to show the size of your baby
- your baby's clothing

Other ideas for mementos:

- poems and notes
- an ultrasound picture
- certificate of death or stillbirth
- items from the naming or religious ceremony

If you are not sure whether to take the mementos home, talk with your nurse or social worker before you leave the hospital. If you wish, the social worker can keep the mementos over the next year. You can call the social worker any time within a year if you wish to collect your mementos.

Getting support

Some parents find it hard to talk about their loss; others find it helpful to talk about it a lot. Many people express their grief by crying. Each person has their own way to express their feelings and has different needs for support.

There are many people who can help you at this time:

- Your caregivers at the hospital can give you information and support, and help you make the arrangements for your baby. If you wish, the social worker or chaplain can continue to support you after you go home.
- Close family and friends can be a great source of support.
- You may find it helpful to get support from other parents who have had a similar experience. A local bereavement support group can help.
- Feelings of loss can be intense. Your family doctor or a grief counsellor can help you understand and cope with these feelings.

The social worker can give you information about the resources available in your community.

At home, if you become overwhelmed by feelings of loss or your family is concerned about you, talk with a health care provider right away. You can call your family doctor, midwife or a public health nurse.

What should I say to my older children?

Parents often find it helpful to share their feelings of sadness with their children. How you explain what happened will depend on how old the children are and how aware they are of the pregnancy. The social worker, chaplain or your faith/religious leader can give you suggestions that will suit each child's age and understanding. If needed, the social worker can contact a child life specialist, who has special training in helping children deal with strong emotions.

What arrangements need to be made for my baby?

An autopsy or examination after death

An autopsy is not always necessary but can be very valuable. It can be done to help explain the reason for your baby's death. You may find this information helpful in planning for a future pregnancy or for other family members.

An autopsy involves an examination of the internal organs of the baby to help understand why the baby died. If you wish, this examination can be limited to the organs of most concern. An autopsy can confirm the sex of a very premature baby. **Your baby will be treated with respect and dignity.**

If you do not want a full autopsy, you may want to consider a limited autopsy. This allows for an examination of the outside of the baby, x-rays and testing of the baby's chromosomes, if that is needed.

Your doctor will talk to you about an autopsy. Please ask the doctor any questions you may have to help you make a decision. If you decide to have an autopsy, you will need to sign a consent form when you are ready. The doctor may schedule a follow-up appointment in 2 to 3 months to discuss the results of the autopsy.

A burial or cremation

The doctor, social worker or chaplain will discuss with you when burial or cremation is required by law. This is usually after 20 weeks of pregnancy. Before 20 weeks, a burial or cremation is a choice you can make.

Some parents may find comfort in making these arrangements. Parents may take a few hours or several days to make decisions about burial or cremation before requesting assistance from a funeral home.

If parents have not made arrangements for an infant who is under 20 weeks, cremation will be done by the hospital.

Who can help with the arrangements?

The hospital social worker, chaplain or your own faith/religious leader can offer information and help with the arrangements for burial or cremation.

You, or your representative, can contact a funeral home of your choice. The funeral director will meet with you to explain your options and the costs. He or she will make all the arrangements that you select.

With some religious faiths, this planning and the arrangements take place at the religious centre rather than at the funeral home.

How does my baby reach the funeral home?

The funeral director will come to the hospital and transport the baby to the funeral home. There may be a mileage cost if the location is outside of Hamilton.

If you prefer, parents or family may take the baby from the hospital to the funeral home or to your religious centre, after signing a release form. It is important to tell a health care provider that you are planning to take your baby to the funeral home. He or she will help you arrange a suitable way to carry your baby to the funeral home.

Is a funeral service necessary?

No. A traditional funeral service is not required by law.

The plans you make will depend on your spiritual beliefs, family customs and traditions. You may choose not to have a service. Or you may decide to have a ritual, ceremony or funeral service. This could be a private memorial service, a graveside service or a larger service. The chaplain, your faith/religious leader or the funeral director can help you make these arrangements.

If you decide to have a burial, you may choose to have your baby placed in an existing family cemetery site, in a cemetery area set aside for infant burials, or in a newly purchased cemetery site.

If you decide to have a cremation, you may choose to have your baby's ashes returned to you to keep, to sprinkle at a location which is important to you or to be buried at an existing grave site. You may have the funeral director seal the ashes in a container which you provide or in one purchased from the funeral home.

What does burial or cremation cost?

The cost of burial or cremation varies by community.

In Hamilton, the funeral homes provide their services, a simple casket, transportation from the hospital, cremation and grief counselling at NO cost to parents. There is a fee for the paperwork required for cremation. If you have a burial, you will need to pay for a cemetery site and the opening and closing of a grave site. The cost of these services varies, but is usually about \$200 to \$500.

**If you have questions or need help,
please talk with your health care providers.**

Social worker: _____ (name) _____ (phone)

Chaplain: _____ (name) _____ (phone)

