

---

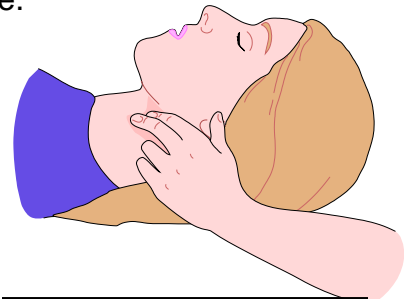
# What to do when a Patient Dies at Home

---

Even when a death is expected it is often an emotional experience for those who are present. Although the family may expect the death when a patient is receiving hospice care, it can still be overwhelming and difficult to accept. It is important to remain calm and caring.

### Signs a person has died

- Absent heart beat and no breathing. It is sometimes difficult to tell if the heart has stopped beating or the patient has stopped breathing. Patients can have weak heartbeats and may take little breaths very slowly with long pauses between breaths. Check for pulse by listening to the heart or feeling for a pulse in the neck for a full minute. Listen and look for breathing for a full minute.
- Skin may look very blue, pale and waxy.
- Eyes are often half open and will not close.
- Jaw may relax causing the mouth to be partially open and may not close.
- Bowels and/or bladder may empty.



### What can you do for the deceased?

- Show respect when caring for the body.
- If the patient has oxygen, turn it off.
- Allow the family private time with the body.
- Ask the family if they want you to reposition the patient to look more comfortable or if they want things left as they are.
- Take your cues from the family as to what they would feel is most helpful.
- Follow any further instructions provided to you by the nurse. Generally, the nurse will take care of the removal of catheters and drains; however the nurse will provide you with instructions.

Check for pulse by  
feeling for a pulse in  
the neck for a full  
minute

### What you can do for the family

- Let the family know the patient's heart has stopped, you *think* the patient has died, and that you will call the hospice.
- Stay with the family until the nurse arrives or directed otherwise by the family.
- Families may respond very differently. Some express grief loudly and openly, while others hardly react at all. It is very individualized. Ask the family if they want to participate in provide post mortem care.
- Be sensitive to family needs. At times a hug and close presence may be comforting, but for some this may be upsetting. Ask before you touch or give a hug.

Other HPNA Teaching Sheets on are available at [www.HPNA.org](http://www.HPNA.org).

## References

Ferrell B, Borneman T. Community Implementation of a Home Care Palliative Care Education. *Cancer Practice*; 2002; 10:1.

Martinez J. Care at the time of dying. *Hospice and Palliative Nursing Assistant Core Curriculum*. Pittsburgh PA: The Hospice and Palliative Nurses Association; 2009; 77-86.

Approved by the HPNA Education Committee December 2009.  
Revised by the HPNA Education Advisory Team November 2013.