

What to expect after the stillbirth of your baby

Stillbirth is the term given to a baby who dies before birth and who is older than 20 weeks gestation or weighs more than 400 grams. Losing a baby to stillbirth can be a devastating experience. Parents often feel overwhelmed and quite unprepared for the emotional journey that may follow.

As the authors of this parent information sheet, the Queensland Centre for Mothers and Babies and the Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Support (SANDS) organisation extend our sympathy to you after the death of your baby.

IMPORTANT: The information contained in this information sheet is general information only. It is not intended to be treated by you as professional advice for a particular factual situation and is no substitute for seeking professional advice from your health care provider. In all procedures your health care provider will explain what will happen, the risks and benefits and will ask for your informed consent. If you choose not to have an intervention, your decision will be respected.

What is grief?

Grief is a reaction to loss. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Each parent's grief journey is unique and finding the support you need is important.

Intense reactions are very common. Deep sadness, anxiety, fear, anger, guilt, helplessness and despair are just some of the many emotions you might experience.

Physical reactions such as tiredness, loss of appetite, and difficulty concentrating or remembering things are also very common.

Some parents say that their grief is more intense at some times than others. For many parents, the death of their baby brings a grief that is unexpected, deep, intense, overwhelming and long lasting.

How long will my grief last?

There is no timeframe for grief. At times it might seem you will never feel 'normal' again.

Parents who have experienced a stillbirth often recall many ups and downs and how over time

they began to embrace life again. Sometimes this means creating a new 'normal'.

Each person incorporates the experience of the death of their baby into their lives in their own way. Allowing yourself the time and space to grieve — and finding the support you need from others — is important.

Can I spend time with my baby?

Some parents find that having the chance to spend time with their baby is important. Having time with your baby can help to create precious memories. These memories can be a helpful part of the grieving process.

The idea of seeing and holding your baby may seem confronting or frightening at first, especially if you have never seen a dead body before. Many parents feel this way but with the support of their health care providers, have found the time spent with their baby to be a very positive experience.

If you are not sure about seeing your baby or are anxious about how your baby may look, your health

care provider will be able to assist you. They can give you information, support and answer your questions about what your baby looks like.

If you made the decision not to see your baby after the birth, and then change your mind, you can still ask to see your baby. This can happen either at the hospital if you have not yet gone home or before his/her funeral. You can see and hold your baby as often as you wish.

Can I take my baby home?

Some parents have found that having special time at home with their baby helped to create deeply special memories. Some have invited family and friends to the home to meet their baby.

To help you decide whether to take your baby home, your health care provider can give you more information about:

- › embalming (preserving) your baby's body
- › release from hospital - forms will be completed for the release of your baby from hospital
- › legal requirements for birth and death registration and burial or cremation

Your funeral director will arrange travel for your baby to your home.



What will happen with my baby's body?

Your health care provider may suggest that your baby has an autopsy. A hospital autopsy is a detailed physical and surgical examination of a body after death. An autopsy may provide you with information about why your baby died.

Only some hospitals in Queensland have the facilities to do autopsies. Your baby may be transferred to a different hospital for the autopsy and then returned.

Once your baby is back at the hospital, he/she will be discharged. If an autopsy is not being performed on your baby's body, the hospital will discharge your baby.

In both cases, the funeral director will arrange travel for your baby either to the funeral home or to your home. The hospital staff will help you complete the paperwork.

In Queensland, it is a legal requirement to arrange a burial or cremation for a stillborn baby.

How can I keep memories of my baby?

You can create memories of your baby by:

- › holding your baby
- › spending time looking at your baby cuddling, kissing and singing to your baby
- › making footprints and handprints
- › bathing and dressing your baby (depending on your baby's size and fragility)
- › you may already have a special outfit for your baby to wear, or if your baby is very small you may like to wrap him or her in a special blanket or shawl
- › taking photographs and videos of your baby. Heartfelt is a volunteer organization of professional photographers who will take memorable photos of your baby. Their contact details are available over the page.
- › creating a memory box and collecting items that have been important to you during this time (for example, the original shawl your baby was wrapped in, a lock of hair)
- › introducing your baby to family and friends
- › having a baptism, christening or other ceremony

- › having a funeral or other memorial ceremony to say goodbye to your baby

Your health care provider can assist you to do many of these things and can direct you to other resources and organizations that will provide further assistance and ideas.

What are hospital mementos?

Your health care provider in hospital will arrange for special mementos of your baby for you to keep. This may include the tape measure used to measure your baby, a lock of his/her hair, your baby's cot name card, identification bracelet, footprints and handprints.

If you don't want to see these mementos while you are in the hospital, you may like to take them home, or give them to another family member or friend. You might find you are ready to look at them at a later time.

How will I tell my family & friends?

Telling family members and friends about the death of your baby can be difficult. You don't need to tell everyone immediately, you can tell people when you feel ready.

Family and friends may be waiting for news of the birth, and will probably have questions about the sex, weight and name of your baby. If you are not up to telling people your news, you might ask a close family member or friend to do this for you.

You can help set the tone of the conversation with the words "I have some sad news".

You might find that people are shocked and may not know what to do or say. At times their comments might seem unhelpful or even hurtful or there may be long silences. Some people might say things to try to make you feel better. Others may distance themselves because they may not know what to say or do. It might be helpful to remind yourself that people react in different ways.

Information sheets produced by SANDS can help. SANDS has information about coping with the death of a baby for fathers, couples, grandparents, family and friends.

How will I tell other children in the family?

Telling other children in the family that a baby has died can be difficult. How and what they are told will depend on their age, stage of development and their relationship with the baby.

Children have different needs and will have different responses to the baby's death.

What will happen with my breastmilk?

Most mother's milk supply will gradually decrease when they hold back (suppress) lactation by limiting the amount of milk expressed, wearing a firm bra, using cold packs and medication for pain and inflammation if required.

Your health care providers will give you information and support for reducing your milk production and preventing engorgement (painful, overfull breasts), blocked ducts and mastitis.

Will I receive a follow up?

You will receive a follow up appointment at your nearest hospital or clinic within 2 months following the birth of your baby. Your health care provider will discuss any health concerns you might have.

What costs are involved?

Many funeral homes offer free or discounted services for stillborn babies. Your funeral director can confirm any costs with you.

If you apply for a death certificate, this will cost \$35. Other costs vary depending on your choice of funeral director. These costs may include a cremation permit, floral tributes, celebrant/minister fee and newspaper notices.

What financial support is available?

Australian parents of stillborn babies are usually eligible for the maternity allowance, maternity leave and bereavement payment. The forms to claim these may be available at your hospital, or you can contact Centrelink for more information and to make a claim.

Comfort, support & information

Your friends, family, doctor and hospital staff can offer you comfort, support and information at this time. Other services include:

SANDS provides support to parents and families who experience miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal and infant death. For more information or support, please contact the SANDS Queensland office: 07 3254 3422 or 13 000 SANDS (13 000 72637), admin@sandsqld.com or via our website www.sandsqld.com

At SANDS there are people who understand what it's like because they too have been through this experience. People have many different needs at this time and SANDS is here to offer support and information 24 hours a day for anyone affected by the death of a baby.

SANDS offers empathy and understanding and the opportunity to talk, listen and share experiences in a safe, non-judgmental and caring environment.

We offer a wide range of support services including:

- › **Phone Support** – bereaved parents, family members, health professionals and members of the wider community can talk in confidence to an experienced parent support worker. Phone 13 000 SANDS (13 000 72637).
- › **Email Support** – sometimes it can be easier to communicate by email than by phone. By emailing the SANDS office, we will put you in touch with a parent supporter who is able to offer support via email. Our office email is admin@sandsqld.com
- › **Support Groups** – run by and for bereaved parents at a local level in many parts of Queensland. All support group meetings and contact details are listed on our website www.sandsqld.com
- › **Information Resources** – we have a large range of resources including books, leaflets, videos and DVDs as well as a library service. These resources cover many of the emotional and practical issues faced by parents and families following pregnancy loss.
- › **SANDS Newsletter** – our monthly newsletter provides information and support and provides a link with other parents. Many find it especially helpful to read about the experiences of other bereaved parents and to know they are not alone.

Australian Breastfeeding Association 1800 mum 2 mum (1800 686 2 686) Provides counselling and breastfeeding information to any person seeking help. www.breastfeeding.asn.au/bfinfo/lactationsuppression.html

Teddy Love Club 1800 824 240 The Teddy Love Club is a support program for bereaved families who have experienced loss through miscarriage, stillbirth, and termination of pregnancy for foetal abnormality or neonatal death. www.teddyloveclub.org.au

Small Miracles Foundation 1300 266 643 The Small Miracles Foundation provides Australia wide, free grief counselling services to families who have lost a baby. www.smfoundation.org.au

Heartfelt 1800 583 768 or Qld Representative Andrea Sproxton: 0423 132 601 A volunteer organization of professional photographers who provide photographic memories to families. All services are provided free of charge. www.heartfelt.org.au

SIDS and KIDS 1300 308 307 (24 hour) Bereavement support and counselling to families who have experienced stillbirth or the sudden and unexpected death of a child, regardless of the cause. www.sidsandkids.org

Centrelink (Family Assistance Office) 13 61 50 Centrelink provides financial assistance including maternity allowances and bereavement payments. www.centrelink.gov.au

Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages (Queensland)

1300 366 430 The registry records and maintains life event registrations in Queensland and issues live event certificates. www.justice.qld.gov.au/justice-services/births-deaths-and-marriages

If you have comments about the content of this parent information sheet email info@qcmb.org.au