

Home Vigil Body Care Instructions

This document is designed to be an end-of-life action plan that instructs family and community about death care at home and outlines unembalmed body care for a deceased person. Anam Cara Therapies in partnership with A Thousand Hands is providing this template in an attempt to share information about the process of caring for a loved one after they have died and demystify the process of burying without embalming.

Please note that this information may be helpful for home vigils in other states, but each state has differing laws on what is legally acceptable death practice. This document was developed in accordance with Minnesota state laws.

After a person has died, these are body care guidelines to follow:

Remember you can pause for a minute and just be with the loved one. It is important to allow the family and friends some time to “be with” in the time of transition.

1. After a person dies, you have a few hours until rigor mortis sets in. It is best to perform body cares including bathing before this sets because the body will become extremely stiff.
2. A bed bath is the next step and can be done with soap and water or other forms of steeped water per tradition (i.e. cedar water). You generally want to work from the top of the head down to the feet. This can be done in a manner where the person is completely undressed or dressed fully. Some bed baths are done with only washing hands and feet. It is important to know how comfortable that person would have been with being naked around certain people. You may have some private areas covered while washing.
3. It is not uncommon for people to eliminate body fluids upon death, however, if the person has not been eating and drinking for several days, this may be minimal. Please make sure to clean the person to be free of urine or feces and use universal precautions (gloves) when handling blood as well. Also during death edema may happen, this is when the person because of their condition “weeps” body fluids through skin and has a swollen appearance. You may need to consider this when doing a bed bath. Other areas to check for released fluids include eyes, ears, and mouth for released fluids.
4. If there are any open areas on the skin such as tubes, IVs, stomas from colostomy bags, bed sores or other wounds, pack with them gauze and seal with medical tape.
5. It is okay if the skin turns different shades during the cooling process. At first the arms and legs may be blue, this is called cyanosis and is normal. The skin may go through several changes.
6. If you hear a “crackling” noise coming from the body or there is a very strong and noticeable odor being emitted from the body after death, this is likely a sign that a person has a communicable disease must be embalmed due to public health laws. Contact funeral home right away. This is very rare.

7. Clean the mouth with a cotton ball soaked in mouthwash and swab around cheeks and teeth. You can also use a gloved finger with toothpaste and perform a light rinse.
8. If you want to wash hair, lift head and roll up a towel under neck. Place garbage bag under head and place hair in bag. This will catch water. You can also use a dry shampoo, cornstarch or baby powder. Style hair accordingly.
9. File and trim nails, as needed.
10. Some people may prefer light makeup. You may want to discuss this with the person before death.
11. Dressing the body will require several people. It is literally "dead weight," so plan accordingly. Pants and skirts are generally easy to put on. You may need to cut the back of a shirt or a dress and fit over the arms while tucking the cut ends under the body. Put on jewelry, per preference.
12. If you would like eyes closed, you can use vaseline to help "glue" eyelids shut. They will typically stay if they are set before rigor mortis occurs. You can use stones, coins, or other items to set eye lids. You can remove after the body sets and they will stay.
13. If you want to close the person's jaw, wrap an ace bandage around the jaw up towards the top of the head. Once the body sets you can remove and it will stay.
14. If the person's feet are falling to the side and not staying upright, you can bandage the feet together and the body should stay in the position once it sets.
15. To move the person, they need to be under a bed sheet and have about 6 people helping. Think about the route you will take in the home or space to move someone. Roll the sheet inward to fit in your hand and coordinate together well. Do not take full steps. It is more of a shuffle. When placing a person for a vigil, have a bed, table, or flat surface on which the person will lay. Think about the route in and out of the space and which door you will use to leave the home when transporting to a car.
16. You will want to start cooling the body down after cleaning and dressing. It is a good idea to have pre-frozen techni ice ready. You can also purchase dry ice. The ice should be put in a gallon bag so it is not directly touch the skin. Place 3 sheets (6 pockets each) under the person and 3 above on chest/mid-section area to cool organs. It is also a good idea to place ice behind head to cool the brain.
17. Other ideas to cool the person include keeping the home cool at about 62-65 degrees if you have central air or if death occurs in the winter, open the windows of your home in the room where the person is in vigil.
18. Some families elect to have a person sit with their loved ones until burial. Once the body cares are done, it may be helpful to arrange shifts.