

Saying
goodbye
to your baby

No parent expects to arrange a funeral for their baby. While this is a very hard thing to do, many parents have said that doing special things to “say goodbye” was a way of honouring their baby, including others in their baby’s life and helped them to move forward through their grief. This section talks about seeing and naming your baby, registering their death and arranging their funeral.

Seeing and holding your baby



If your baby lived for a short while, or was admitted to a neonatal unit, you may have held and cuddled your baby before they died. You may have provided skin-to-skin care and spent time next to their incubator reading stories to them and, if you are the birth mother, you might have expressed your milk for them.

If your baby died before or during the birth, the midwife or nurse will usually ask if you would like to see and

hold them. If you want to see your baby and no one has suggested it, ask the staff caring for you.

Some parents feel it is important to see their baby regardless of their size, condition or the stage at which they died. Some parents may find the idea of seeing and holding their baby strange and a bit frightening, especially if they haven’t previously seen anyone who has died.

For many parents, the time they spend with their baby becomes very precious memories in the months and years afterwards.

If you are not sure about seeing your baby, or are anxious about how your baby will look, you could ask the midwife or nurse to show you a photo. If your baby has a visible anomaly, you can ask your midwife or nurse to describe your baby. You can also ask for your baby to be washed and dressed before you see them.

If your baby died quite a long time before the birth, their appearance and colour may have changed. These changes are difficult to predict and may influence whether or not you wish to see your baby. You could ask the midwife or nurse to describe your baby for you first. If you choose not to see your baby, you may decide that you want to see just part of them, such as their hand or foot.

If you initially decided not to see your baby, or were too unwell to see them, you will have the option of seeing them afterwards. You can contact the hospital and let them know that you would like to see your baby. You can ask to see your baby more than once or to take them home.

It is important to remember that you do not have to make the same decision as your partner. Each parent needs to do what is right for them.

Naming your baby

Many parents decide to name their baby, giving the baby their own identity and making it easier to talk about them. Some parents continue to use a nickname that they used during the pregnancy. If a baby is extremely premature or has died some time before they were born, it can be hard to determine their gender and you might like to choose a name that fits either gender.

You do not have to name your baby if this does not feel right for you.

Washing and dressing your baby

You may want to wash and/or dress your baby, or you could ask the midwife or nurse to help you. For many parents, bathing and dressing their baby is a special opportunity to care for their baby and form treasured memories.

You could bring something from home for your baby to wear. If your baby is very small, the hospital may be able to supply suitable clothing. Many units have a stock of very small clothes. You may also be able to order very small clothing online at www.littlebabyandco.com. If your baby's condition makes dressing them difficult, you might want to wrap them in a blanket or something similar. If it is helpful, you can ask a midwife or a funeral director to help you do this.

Deciding on a funeral for your baby

If your baby died before birth and had not reached 24 weeks of pregnancy, you won't be able to register their birth officially. You may, however, request a special certificate from Sands.

If your baby was stillborn at 24 weeks or later, or died after birth, you are legally required to have a burial or cremation for them, although not necessarily a funeral. Your baby's stillbirth, or birth and death, must be registered by the local registrar of births and deaths. The hospital staff will tell you how and where to register. The registrar will give you a certificate that you will need for the burial or cremation.

Although there is no legal requirement to have a funeral, this could be an opportunity to say goodbye to your baby in the presence of your family and friends. If you prefer for the hospital to arrange the funeral, you might need to let them know before you are discharged to go home. Some hospitals can arrange funerals only for those babies who died before birth. Most funeral directors will offer a funeral free of charge for babies.

Before the funeral

Some parents feel they want to take their baby home before the funeral. Unless a coroner or procurator fiscal has ordered a post-mortem examination, this is usually possible.

If you would like to take your baby home, or out of the hospital environment to a place which has special meaning for you, feel free to discuss this with a midwife or nurse. Many hospitals give parents a form to take with them to confirm their right to take their baby's body out of the hospital. You may like to take your baby for a walk or to meet any other siblings, family or friends.

The staff should also give you information about keeping your baby as cool as possible. Some hospitals, children's hospices and funeral directors have cold cots (also known as cuddle cots) which can help to keep your baby cool and stop their body from deteriorating. You may be able to borrow one for your baby.

If your baby remains in hospital, they are likely to be kept in the hospital or maternity unit mortuary. You will be able to visit your baby although this might feel more difficult than the time you spent with them on the ward. Your baby might be in a Chapel of Rest or a room by the mortuary that is for both adults, children and babies who have died and this might feel more difficult for you.

If the hospital is arranging the funeral, the staff will tell you when to bring your baby back or when to take them to the funeral director. If you are arranging the funeral yourself, you will have the option of keeping your baby at home with you until the funeral takes place. We have resources for funerals on the Sands website.

Preparing your baby for the funeral

You may want to wash and dress your baby for the funeral. If your baby has had a post-mortem examination, ask the hospital staff to tell you what to expect. For example, they can describe where any stitch lines might be and make other suggestions for handling your baby. Any stitch lines will be covered when the baby is dressed and wrapped. Alternatively, you could ask the hospital staff or the funeral director to help you.



Depending on your baby's size and condition, you may want them to be dressed in a particular outfit or wrapped in a special blanket. You may also want to put special items into your baby's coffin, such as a soft toy, photos, a letter or a poem. Some parents keep an identical outfit, blanket, toy, letter or poem as a keepsake. Any other children within or close to your family may like to draw a picture or write a letter. However, if you have decided to have your baby cremated, you should ask the funeral director or crematorium what you can put in the coffin with your baby.

If your baby was in neonatal intensive care, they might not have worn any clothes. Many babies wear only a nappy when they are in an incubator so this might be the first time that you will be dressing your baby.

Accompanying your baby's coffin to the funeral ceremony

If your baby is at the funeral home or the hospital, you can ask the funeral director to take them to the venue of the funeral. If you do not want a hearse, you could ask that your baby be transported in an ordinary car. Some funeral directors have cars that are adapted to carry a small coffin and have space for the family.

You will also have the option of collecting your baby and taking them to the ceremony yourself. If you are using a taxi, make sure that they agree in advance to transport a coffin. If your baby is at home, you can take them directly to the funeral.

The ceremony

If you are arranging the funeral yourself, you will need to think about the type of ceremony you would like. For some bereaved parents, their baby's funeral will be the first funeral they have had to think about, and for some it will be the first they have ever had to attend. Couples sometimes find that they want different things and need time to reach decisions. You may also want time to discuss your choices with family members and close friends. If you have had twins or more babies from a multiple birth who have died, you may want them to share a coffin and a funeral.

If you have older children, you may want to include them in planning your baby's funeral. Likewise, if you have a baby who is in hospital, you might like to wait until they recover and take them to their sibling's funeral. It is important that you make a decision that feels right for you at the time.

If you need to arrange a funeral very quickly for religious or other reasons, please tell the hospital staff. They will advise you about urgent registration so that you can see if this is a possibility.

Funerals arranged by the hospital

If the hospital offers to arrange your baby's funeral, there may not be as many choices as you would have if you make your own arrangements.

Hospital funeral ceremonies for babies are usually led by one of the hospital chaplains. Most hospitals hold a shared funeral ceremony at regular intervals for all the babies who have died within a certain period of time. Some hospitals might be able to organise an individual ceremony for your baby if that is what you prefer.

Shared funeral ceremonies are usually non-denominational and suitable for those of faith and of no faith as well. Parents, and anyone else they want to invite, are usually welcome to attend. The ceremony may be held in a hospital chapel, crematorium or cemetery chapel. You could ask the hospital chaplain if it is possible to include a poem, a reading, or music that has meaning for you. You might also like to take some flowers with you. The hospital can arrange a funeral for your baby even if you don't feel able to attend.

If the hospital offers you an individual funeral, you can choose a hospital chaplain or another religious leader to lead the ceremony. If there is no religious leader of your own faith, the hospital might be able to recommend someone. You might instead choose a non-religious leader.

Some hospitals offer both burials and cremations. In areas where the cost of graves is very high, hospitals may offer only cremation, or burial in a shared grave.

Burials

Burials arranged by the hospital are often in a shared grave. Although many babies are buried together, they will still be in their own coffins. Some hospitals offer parents the option of an

individual grave as well. Individual graves are most commonly offered to parents of those babies who died after birth or who died at a later stage in pregnancy. Similarly, individual cremations are often reserved for those babies who died after birth or at a later stage in pregnancy.

Many cemeteries have a special area for babies' graves. Most cemeteries have restrictions about what can be placed on or around a grave and it is usually not possible to put a headstone or memorial on a shared grave. You may be able to make your own arrangements for a plaque somewhere else in the cemetery. Although the hospital would be arranging the funeral, you can contact the cemetery directly to ask about memorial options.

Cremations

One of the key questions for parents who have opted for a cremation is whether they will receive their baby's ashes. This could depend on:

- Whether or not you have opted for an individual or joint cremation: ashes are available for individual cremations only. For shared cremations, all the ashes will be buried or scattered together in a special place in the crematorium grounds.
- The size of your baby: if your baby is very small, the amount of ashes might be very little. Some ashes usually get absorbed in the cremation chamber. This means that there might be no ashes left.
- The facilities at the crematorium: some crematoria have special facilities to protect ashes even for babies who are very small. You can enquire in advance to help you choose the right crematorium.

The ashes will contain remains of any items that are cremated with your baby inside the coffin. Any items that are placed on top of the coffin may be removed before the coffin is placed in the cremation chamber.

You may choose to scatter or bury your baby's ashes somewhere special to you, a favourite walk or woodland. If you choose to bury or scatter your baby's ashes in a crematorium, they may have regulations about what you can place near the area where the ashes are buried or scattered. You may, however, be able to have a plaque placed somewhere else in the crematorium gardens.

“ At his funeral I wore a blue dress. I didn't want anyone wearing black. When his tiny coffin was taken out of the car I heard a collective intake of breath from our families. In that moment, for them it became real. Gemma

Funerals arranged by funeral directors

If you have chosen not to have the hospital arrange a funeral for your baby, you could contact a funeral director to assist you. A few crematoria will accept cremations through funeral directors only. The hospital staff may be able to give you the contact details of local funeral directors who specialise in funerals for babies.

You can also find information in the Good Funeral Guide www.goodfuneralguide.co.uk or the National Association of Funeral Directors (NAFD) website at www.nafd.org.uk.

It is important to make sure that the funeral director you choose is a member of a professional body such as the NAFD. The funeral director will ask you to sign a form allowing them to collect your baby from the hospital mortuary and they can usually organise the other paperwork that is required.

Forms you will need

If you are making funeral arrangements without the help of a funeral director in England, Wales or Northern Ireland, staff at the crematorium will give you copies of the forms you need to complete. Forms are no longer needed in Scotland.

In England and Wales, if your baby died after birth but before 24 weeks, you will need a cremation form that is signed by a registered doctor. Your midwife or doctor can give you more information. You do not need this form if your baby died before birth or after 24 completed weeks of pregnancy.

In Northern Ireland, you will need a cremation form and a confirmatory medical certificate form to cremate your baby, if they died before birth at a minimum of 24 weeks, or if they died after birth. These forms need to be signed by two different doctors. Your midwife or doctor can give you more information.

If your baby needs a post-mortem examination, you will need to wait until this is completed before you can hold the funeral. If a referral has been made to the coroner or procurator fiscal (in Scotland), there may be a slightly longer delay before the funeral can be held. The coroner's or procurator fiscal's officer will explain what will happen and provide expected timescales for returning your baby to you.

If your baby died before birth and had not completed 24 weeks (legally described as a "late miscarriage"), their death cannot be officially registered. Although it is not an official document, Sands can provide a certificate for you to keep as an acknowledgement of your baby.

The funeral director, crematorium or cemetery will usually need a form or letter from the hospital or your GP to confirm that your baby died before birth before 24 completed weeks of pregnancy. A burial or cremation can then be arranged.

The service

Just as with adult funerals, you can choose the type of service you would like to have, including an order of service, readings, music and flowers, and let people know what colours you would like them to wear to the funeral. You may like to have a small gathering after the service.

If you choose not to have flowers at the funeral, you might like to request donations instead to a charity of your choice. Sands has funeral envelopes and other resources available if you would like. You may choose to hold the funeral service at an external public venue or you may prefer a more intimate space such as your home or your garden. If you are looking for a reading for the service, you can browse some readings and funeral resources at www.sands.org.uk/funeralresources.



Some parents ask a friend or relative to take photographs. It is important to let them know exactly what you want them to do and especially if there are any times during the service that you want them to avoid taking photographs. Photos can provide you with precious mementoes and remind you of the people who came to honour your baby and to support you. These photos may also be helpful for young siblings as they grow older, or as a way of starting a conversation with them about their brother or sister.

If you want photos or a video of the funeral ceremony itself, check first with the person leading the funeral, the funeral director and any staff involved in the funeral. It is usually possible as long as the funeral is only for your baby and is not shared with others.

After the funeral – cremations

If your baby was cremated, and it is possible to collect the ashes, you will have time to decide what to do with them.

There are various options for burying, immersing or scattering your baby's ashes:

- The crematorium could bury or scatter the ashes in a special place in the crematorium grounds. The crematorium will have regulations about this.
- You could choose to scatter the ashes in a place that is special to you such as a woodland or in your own garden, though before you decide, consider whether you might move home in the future.
- You could choose to scatter or immerse them in water as long as the urn you use is biodegradable. You might like to scatter flowers or petals as well. Phone your Local Environment Agency office to make sure that the site you are thinking of falls within their guidance.
- If you want to keep the ashes, you could store them in an urn or another container of your choosing. There are also frames that have a compartment at the back to hold ashes behind the photograph.

- You could also choose to have jewellery made from ashes.

After the funeral - burials

- It could take at least six months before you will be able to set a headstone for your baby.
- There may be restrictions on what you can place on and around your baby's grave. Please contact the cemetery for more information.

