

Coping With Loss When a Baby Dies During Pregnancy or Shortly After Birth



The death of a baby during pregnancy or shortly after birth is a profound loss and one of the most difficult experiences you are likely to face. After the initial shock, you may feel intense grief, sadness, anger, confusion, loneliness or even numbness. We know this is a painful experience and want to be supportive. In addition to our physicians and nurses, we can help you process your feelings and provide spiritual and emotional support. We hope that the following information may be helpful to you and your family.

Life ends before it begins

During pregnancy, expectant parents have great hopes for their new baby. They pick names, decorate rooms, make plans for their baby's future and do everything they can to prepare for a new family member. The death of a baby destroys these hopes, fantasies and dreams. Accepting the loss of a life before it had a chance to begin is extraordinarily difficult.

You are not alone in this devastating experience. Unfortunately, about one in 160 pregnancies end in stillbirth, defined as any fetal death after 20 weeks, while about one in 300 babies die within the first 28 days of birth. When an expectant mother learns her baby has died in her womb, she often feels frightened and overwhelmed — especially if she needs to go through labor and delivery for a child who is no longer alive. Some mothers arrive at the hospital knowing their fetus or newborn has a lethal anomaly. They may be hopeful that something can be done to save their baby's life and become overwhelmed with sadness, shock and distress when their baby doesn't survive.

After your baby dies

When you first learn your baby has died, you are likely to experience intense emotions and may become disoriented temporarily or have trouble processing information. Holding and touching your baby will help you understand that your baby has died and will give you a real, rather than an imagined, memory of your baby. It is especially helpful to see your baby if she or he has a birth defect, as parents often imagine the defect to be much worse than the real problem.

Holding your baby is a difficult, but important, step in the grieving process. To help you through the experience, a nurse will bring you your baby, wrapped in a blanket, and provide you and your partner with some private family time to say goodbye. It can be helpful to have photographs of your baby. You may also want footprints or a lock of your baby's hair. If you wish, your nurse can help you with these tasks.

Remembering your baby

You may also find it helpful to have a memory book or a special box with tangible reminders of your baby's life, such as a lock of hair, a blanket, your baby's hospital bracelet or sympathy cards. Many grieving parents say they draw comfort from mementos of the precious little time they had with their baby.

Talking about your baby's death

Following a loss, it is sometimes useful to ask a family member or friend to notify others of your loss and what your particular wishes/needs are. Do you want to receive phone calls or visits? Do you want to talk about the baby? You may also want your supervisor or manager at work to inform your colleagues and advise them how to approach you once you return to work.





Memorial service or funeral

Many parents wish to remember their baby with a memorial or funeral service. This can also help friends and other family members understand the loss that you have experienced. You also may want to have a viewing of your baby after you are discharged from the hospital so family and friends can pay their respects.

The hospital will give you a list of mortuaries and funeral homes to contact if you do not have your own. After making a decision about cremation or burial and completing mortuary forms, the funeral home can help transport your baby and arrange for a viewing. You may also choose to have no viewing or burial. Talk with family members to ensure this is the right choice for you, and don't feel pressured into making a decision before you are ready.

Costs of burial or cremation can vary greatly, so be sure to ask the funeral director about prices so you can make an informed decision. Choose the funeral home that you feel most comfortable with and that fits your budget.

Hospital release forms

When you have made a decision about memorial arrangements, the hospital will ask you to sign a release form. Your baby will not leave the hospital without your signed consent.

Help with finances

If you are a low-income family and need financial assistance with funeral expenses, please speak with the maternity social worker. You may also contact the funeral home as they do have payment plans.

Autopsy

Parents who wish to learn more about the cause of their baby's death may schedule an autopsy or special genetic and chromosomal tests. Results typically take a few weeks. You will want to meet with your doctor to learn the results when they are available. An autopsy does not prevent parents from seeing or holding their baby.

If you are asked about an autopsy and are unsure how you feel about it, you do not need to make a decision right away. Talk it over with family. Your hospital staff will answer your questions and can help you clarify which decision is right for you. Unfortunately, autopsies do not always reveal the cause of death.

Intense emotions

After the initial shock of learning your baby has died, you are likely to experience many intense emotions. You may have trouble believing your baby is no longer alive and feel angry with yourself, your partner or your physicians. You may have a deep yearning or longing for your baby or feel envious of other expectant mothers and parents with healthy babies. You may wonder if you will ever overcome your pain. You will never forget your baby, but over time, you will heal.

Feelings of guilt

During pregnancy, expectant parents typically engage in behaviors aimed at having a healthy baby. Perhaps you stopped eating certain foods or started a new course of exercise to stay fit. Because you naturally expected good results, you may feel guilty or responsible for your baby's death — even if you did “everything right.” It may help to talk about these feelings with your physician.

Everyone grieves differently

There is no right way to experience grief. Everyone grieves in his or her own way, and it is normal to feel a wide range of conflicting emotions. You and your partner may experience different feelings at different times. If you and your partner have trouble talking about your feelings or need more support, you both may benefit by speaking to a counselor.

When there are siblings

You might wonder how you will prepare and involve your other children in this difficult experience. Children need to know what has happened to the baby. They need to be reassured that they have not caused the death or the change in your behavior.

After the loss of a baby, parents find it helpful to offer an explanation such as, “Our baby died. The heart stopped beating. We are very sad now because the baby will not live with us as we had hoped and planned.” Avoid using the word “loss” with children as it implies something might be found. Children need to understand that death means the baby is no longer alive and will not come home to live with the family.

With a stillbirth or neonatal death, a parent can ask a sibling if he or she would like to see the baby or pictures of the baby. Children, like adults, need to have visual confirmation of

the death in order for it to be real to them. Children may want to know the reasons for the death. You may or may not have an answer to these difficult questions. Just be honest with your children and use words suited for their age and development. Using the infant's name can be helpful for both parents and children.

Children should be encouraged to continue to laugh, play, bring friends home and do the things they enjoy. Parents can continue to do things that bring the family pleasure within their new “norm.”

Giving each member of the family an opportunity to express his or her feelings will help your family cope with this loss in a personal and healthy manner.

Reactions of family and friends

Parents grieving the death of a baby sometimes feel as though friends and family members lack understanding of their loss. Many people struggle to find the right words and may say things that are unhelpful or sound insensitive. Because death is such a difficult topic, some people avoid discussing it all together, which can leave grieving parents feeling isolated and alone. Don't be afraid to bring up your feelings with family members and friends, and tell them when you need their support. Your loved ones likely want to help, but they may not know how.

Grief heals over time

Grief after a significant loss is normal and can vary significantly in its intensity, duration and impact. Reach out to family and friends, and try to be specific about how they can best support you. While grief may temporarily affect a person's emotional, cognitive, physical, spiritual and social well-being, most experience healing over several months or a year. If you think you may need extra help, please tell your medical provider.