



What to do when someone dies at home

Many people choose to take voluntary assisted dying medications at their home with their family and friends present. This fact sheet provides information for families and friends about what to expect if they are present when a person dies after taking the voluntary assisted dying medication.

Before taking the voluntary assisted dying medication

A person can choose who they want present when they take the medication for example friends, family, health professionals, spiritual or religious advisors, pets.

Being present for someone's death can be a positive experience but may be confronting for some. Patients should talk to people they want present about what to expect and decide whether attending the death is right for them.

Consider organising additional support for those present who may become distressed at the time of death. You can get support from the SA Voluntary Assisted Dying Care Navigator Service or a Voluntary Assisted Dying Local Health Network Liaison Officer.

If a person is taking the medication themselves, also known as self-administration, they can choose to take the medication alone. Whilst this is unusual, if it is the choice of the individual to take the medication alone it is important that they tell someone when and where they plan to take the medication so they can be cared for during and after death.

Taking the voluntary assisted dying medication

Most people will take the voluntary assisted dying medication themselves, also known as self-administration.

If a person is not able to swallow or digest the medication a doctor may give the medication to them, for example through a stomach tube or intravenously (injecting directly into veins), also known as practitioner administration.


Most supporters describe their loved one's voluntary assisted dying death as calm and peaceful.

The person is usually in a deep sleep within minutes of taking the voluntary assisted dying medication. At this point they lose awareness of their surroundings and slowly stop breathing.

In most cases death can occur within 60 minutes of the person taking or being given the voluntary assisted dying medication, but it can sometimes take longer.

Once the person has taken the medication, the person may respond in different ways:

- their eyes may suddenly open and close
- they may snore, cough, splutter, or gurgle
- their body may make sudden movements
- they may have foam or liquid at their mouth
- their jaw may relax and drop open
- they might stiffen, and their face might redden.



These are all normal responses to taking the medication.

Knowing the person has died

You will know the person has died if all the below have occurred:

- they cannot be roused
- they stop breathing
- they have no heartbeat or pulse
- their pupils are fixed staring straight ahead.

When the patient dies there may be some physical signs that could be unusual, for example:

- blood trickling from the nose
- bowel or bladder release (wee or poo leaking out)
- their eyelids may remain partly open
- their body getting cooler to touch
- their body changing colour, for example becoming pale, mottled or blue

Take time to be with the person

You can take time to sit and be with the person who has died.

You don't have to call a doctor or registered nurse right away. If the person dies during the night, you can wait until the morning before calling anyone.

You can follow any usual traditional ceremonies and practices or religious and cultural rites that are important to the person, for example bathing or cleansing the body, shrouding the body, Sorry Business for Aboriginal people.

Keep the room cool and the person lying flat. If they have dentures, keep them in place.

Contact the doctor or nurse

A doctor or registered nurse must confirm the person has died before their body can be moved. It is helpful to arrange for this to occur in advance.

Death can be confirmed by any of the below health professionals:

- your usual treating medical practitioner
- your VAD Coordinating Medical Practitioner
- a registered nurse from the Voluntary Assisted Dying Care Navigator Service or the local health network's Voluntary Assisted Dying Liaison Nurse
- a registered nurse from another community health service, for example your treating palliative care team.

Contact the doctor or registered nurse who agreed to attend the person's home after their death.

If a person dies and a doctor or registered nurse is not available to confirm the death, call SA Ambulance Service on 000. SA Ambulance Service may attend with SA Police.



Contact the funeral director

A funeral director will move the person's body and support you through the funeral arrangements.

The person may have a preferred funeral director and directions for their funeral arrangements, for example in their will or through a prepaid funeral plan.

If the person didn't have a preferred funeral director you can:

- search online for a funeral director
- ask the doctor or nurse attending the home for suggestions.

You don't have to tell the funeral director that the person accessed voluntary assisted dying.

Removing the body

It may be a difficult time when funeral staff come to move the person's body. You may choose to leave the room when they do so.

It may be helpful to have one or two blankets or sheets to cover the body with. You may want to use a special quilt or blanket to cover your loved one.

Information to give the funeral director

The funeral director will attend the home and ask for the following information about the person:

- Full name
- Date and place of birth
- Sex
- Address
- Date and place of death
- Cause of death
- Parents details, marital history, children
- Known wishes regarding burial or cremation.

If you're not sure about dates or the spelling of names, check documents held by the person to confirm the information you give to the funeral director is correct.

The funeral director will register this information with Births, Deaths and Marriages and it will be included on the person's death certificate.

The cause of death recorded on the death certificate is the disease, illness or medical condition that was the grounds for the person to access voluntary assisted dying. Death certificates don't reference voluntary assisted dying.



Doctor confirms cause of death

When someone accessing voluntary assisted dying dies, a doctor must notify Births, Deaths and Marriages and the State Coroner within 48 hours of the death.

In most cases the Coroner will not need to investigate the death.

The funeral director makes sure the notification is made by either:

- the doctor who attends the person's home immediately after their death
- the doctor who was responsible for the patient's medical care immediately before their death, with support of the funeral director.

Death certificate

Death certificates are often needed to finalise a person's estate. This may take some time.

Births, Deaths and Marriages can issue a death certificate after:

- a doctor has confirmed the cause of death
- a funeral director has registered the death.

Funeral directors usually apply for a death certificate. Certain members of a person's family can also apply for a death certificate.

Contact Person returns voluntary assisted dying medication

A Contact Person appointed by the person must return the voluntary assisted dying medication kit to the Voluntary Assisted Dying Pharmacy Service within 15 calendar days of the person's death.

If they do not return the medication kit within 15 days, they could be fined or charged with a crime.

Wills and estates

It can take some time to manage the collection and distribution of a deceased's estate. The Australian Tax Office has a [deceased estate checklist](#) that provides guidance on steps you need to follow.

Grief and bereavement

Grief is a normal response to loss and can affect individuals in different ways.

Grief can be a state of many different feelings; sadness, disbelief, guilt, anxiety, relief that your loved one is no longer in pain or suffering, gratitude or sorrow.

Grief can also cause physical symptoms including difficulty sleeping or feeling the need to sleep more than usual, changed appetite or foggy thinking.



When a person accesses voluntary assisted dying, their family and friends may experience grief complicated by the circumstances of the person's death, for example:

- grief may impact your ability to accept a person's choice to access voluntary assisted dying
- you may experience anticipatory grief in the lead up to the person's death
- you may feel trauma or guilt from having supported your loved one's decision or being present at their death
- some people react negatively to the person accessing voluntary assisted dying and may not acknowledge or support your grief, increasing your sense of loneliness, shame, or anxiety.

Experiences related to grief will become more manageable over time, especially if you have supportive friends and family to talk with. You may choose to access bereavement support from:

- your General Practitioner
- a specialist palliative care service
- [the My Grief App](#)
- [Grief Australia](#)
- [Griefline](#).

Resources and services to support people experiencing grief and loss are available on SA Health's [Bereavement Portal](#).

Support

Some people may find issues relating to voluntary assisted dying concerning or distressing.

If you need to talk to someone, these services provide telephone support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week:

- visit the [Lifeline website](#) or call [13 11 14](#).
- visit our [Bereavement Portal](#) website.
- visit the [SA Health mental health services](#) webpage.
- call the Mental Health Triage Service on [13 14 65](#).
- Call the [Kids Helpline](#) on [1800 551 800](#).

Contact us

For more information about voluntary assisted dying in South Australia visit the [SA Health website](#).

Specialist services are available to support access to and provide information about voluntary assisted dying to people making decisions at end of life, their family, friends and carers, health practitioners and service providers.

South Australian Voluntary Assisted Dying Care Navigator Service (SAVAD-CNS)

For support to access voluntary assisted dying contact:

Email: Health.VADCareNavigators@sa.gov.au

Phone: [0403 087 390](tel:0403 087 390)

Hours: Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm

South Australian Voluntary Assisted Dying Pharmacy Service (SAVAD-PS)

For queries related to the supply, administration or disposal of voluntary assisted dying medication contact:

Email: Health.VADPharmacy@sa.gov.au

Phone: [\(08\) 7326 1746](tel:(08) 7326 1746)

Hours: Monday to Friday, 9.00am to 5.00pm

South Australian Voluntary Assisted Dying Review Board

For any feedback about voluntary assisted dying contact the Review Board Secretariat at:

Email: Health.VADReviewBoard@sa.gov.au

Phone: [\(08\) 8226 8859](tel:(08) 8226 8859)

For more information

Health Services Programs Branch
Department for Health and Wellbeing
Health.VoluntaryAssistedDying@sa.gov.au
www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/vad
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