

Understanding the

# Final Hours



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## UNDERSTANDING THE FINAL HOURS

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The “final hours” refers to the period just before death occurs. It may range from the last hours to short days. This booklet will walk you through the process as you prepare to bid goodbye to your loved one. Do not hesitate to approach your doctor/nurse/social worker or other healthcare professionals for guidance in understanding this stage.

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### How do we know we have reached the final hours?

As your loved one approaches their final hours, he/she will eat less, spend more time sleeping, and lose interest in activities they used to enjoy. Eventually, they will stop eating, drinking and talking.

Physical signs to look out for are:

- **Lowered Body Temperature** — The limbs become cool to touch, especially their fingers and toes.
  - **Mottling** — Purplish blue discolouration appears at their palms and soles of their feet.
  - **Weak pulses** — Their pulse will be very weak or may not even be felt. Your healthcare professional will be able to inform you when this happens.
  - **Drowsiness** — Your loved one will be very sleepy and may not respond to you
  - **Not eating** — As his/her body system slows down, your loved one may no longer have interest in food. Moreover, food consumed may cause stomach discomfort.
- However, if your loved one is still alert, you may feed him/her small teaspoons of their favourite drinks or food to let them enjoy the taste. Refrain from feeding if he/she is drowsy, as they may choke on the fluid/food.

- **Confusion** — Your loved one may appear very restless and uncomfortable as they fidget in bed, gesture with their hands or speak incoherently. However, confusion does not happen to all dying persons.

- **Gurgling** — You may hear some gurgling sounds as your loved one breathes. This is because they have lost the reflex to swallow saliva. The dying person is usually unaware of this.

- **Change in breathing pattern** — Your loved one will tend to breathe with their mouth open as their muscles become more relaxed. Some may breathe loud rapid breaths while others take fast, shallow breaths. He/she is usually not aware of the changes in breathing pattern, and is largely undisturbed by it.

During the final hours, blood pressure and oxygen level readings are expected to be abnormal. At this juncture, frequent checks will not be helpful. It is more important to ensure that your loved one is comfortable.

## What can I do at the bedside?

- **Offer assurance**

Hold your loved one's hand and speak gently into their ears. Use short, simple sentences to reassure them that you are by their side and they will be cared for.

Orientate your loved one by telling him/her the day of the week, the hour of the day and what has been happening in your life. You can reminisce the past with them.

You may also wish to express your feelings. The four important things you may want to say:

- Please forgive me
- I forgive you
- Thank you
- I love you

- **Music/Prayers**

You can play calming music or your loved one's favourite music softly in the room if he/she likes it. Prayers can also be recited to provide spiritual reassurance.

- **Massage**

Your loved one may appreciate being massaged during this time. You can use their usual moisturisers to gently rub into their skin. However, do check with your healthcare professionals before massaging.

- **Oral care**

If you observe your loved one has a dry mouth, apply mouth moisturisers. Check with your healthcare professionals if you are unsure how to do this. Keeping their mouth clean and fresh also improves their sense of well-being.

- **Eye care**

Apply eye gel regularly to prevent drying out of the eyes.

If at any point in time your loved one appears uncomfortable, do inform their healthcare professionals. Or if the caregiver at home is unsure of what to do, they can contact the home care nurse for advice.

 **What are some practical matters that I need to look into during this time?**

- **Have the contact number of a family doctor at hand**

If your loved one dies at home, a doctor has to inspect his/her body to issue the Certificate of Cause of Death (CCOD). Hence, it is advisable to inform your loved one's doctor that the patient is in their last hours. Ask if the doctor can do a house visit when death has occurred. Try and have at least two numbers on standby.

- **Have the contact number of a casket company at hand**

It will be most ideal if your loved one is willing to be involved in discussions of last rites with the casket company representative before he/she becomes too ill to do so. This would ensure his/her preferences for closure are acknowledged and honoured. However, you may also engage a company of your choice when your loved one is dying. Some families prefer to consider the available options before choosing the available casket package.

- **Assigning duties**

You may wish to pre-assign family and friends certain duties and tasks to be carried out when death occurs, e.g., informing a certain group of family or friends that their family member/friend has passed on, informing their spiritual leader, calling the casket company, registering the death, etc. This ensures that needed tasks are performed and does not overwhelm one person.

 **You matter too**

The journey from the time of diagnosis till the last hours is usually exhausting. While you may want to keep vigil, caring for yourself is also important. Do remember to:

- Drink plenty of water to stay hydrated
- Eat well and healthily
- Ensure you have enough sleep. Take shifts with other family members or friends when you need to
- Allow yourself short breaks to stretch and breathe some fresh air

While many keep vigil to catch their loved one's last breath, our loved one may choose to quietly slip away in that little moment when we dozed off, when we needed the bathroom or when we stepped away from the bed for a minute. We may not be able to explain why, but take comfort in precious memories of time spent with your loved one in this final journey.



## How do we know our loved one has passed away?

You can look out for the following signs:

- There is no breathing
- There is no pulsation that can be sometimes seen in the neck
- The eyelids may be slightly open, the pupils (black of the eye) are enlarged and the eyes are fixed in one position
- The jaw is relaxed with the mouth partially open
- The body is usually still warm to touch when death has just occurred. It will gradually become cool to touch

When you notice that breathing has stopped,

- Stay calm
- Watch for 10 minutes to confirm that your loved one has stopped breathing
- Allow yourself to some quiet moments
- Switch on the air conditioner (if available) to keep the room cool

Take your time to inform other family members and friends. There is no need to rush into handling the practical matters. Registration of death can be done later, as long as it is done within 24 hours of the death.



## What's next?

After your loved one has passed on, there are matters that will need your attention:

### 1. Certificate of Cause of Death (CCOD)

This is issued by the doctor. Your loved one's original NRIC or passport is required. If the death happened at home, call the doctor to make a house visit to certify the death.

### 2. Death Certificate

This is issued by the police at any neighbourhood police centre. These documents are required:

- a) CCOD
- b) Original NRIC or passport of your loved one
- c) Original NRIC of the person reporting the death and collecting the Death Certificate

### 3. Call the casket company

The casket company will assist and guide you through the necessary arrangements, e.g. cremation or burial time slots, booking of venue for wake, tentage, catering.

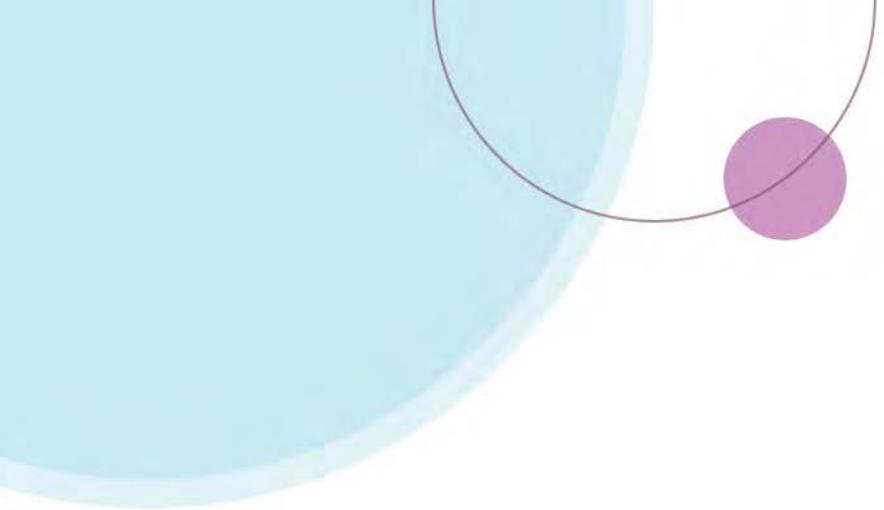
### 4. Call your religious leader

Depending on your loved one's religion and your cultural practices, you may or may not need to inform your religious leader. Some families would appreciate a prayer said at the bedside before the body is claimed by the undertaker.

### 5. Inform family and friends

Use the pre-assigned duties and tasks list, if there is one. If a list is not available, you may consider asking for help in specific duties and tasks.

Remember that you are not alone. Do not hesitate to ask for help.



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**SINGAPORE HOSPICE COUNCIL**

1 Lorong 2 Toa Payoh #07-00  
Braddell House Singapore 319637  
Email: [secretariat@singaporehospice.org.sg](mailto:secretariat@singaporehospice.org.sg)  
Web: [www.singaporehospice.org.sg](http://www.singaporehospice.org.sg)  
Tel: 6538 2231

*Disclaimer: This booklet is meant to serve as a guide. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Please refer to our website for the most recent updates.*

 **Important Contacts**

Hospice Nurse: \_\_\_\_\_

Hospice Hotline: \_\_\_\_\_

**Doctor (for death certification)**

Number 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Number 2: \_\_\_\_\_

**Casket Company**

Company name: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact person: \_\_\_\_\_

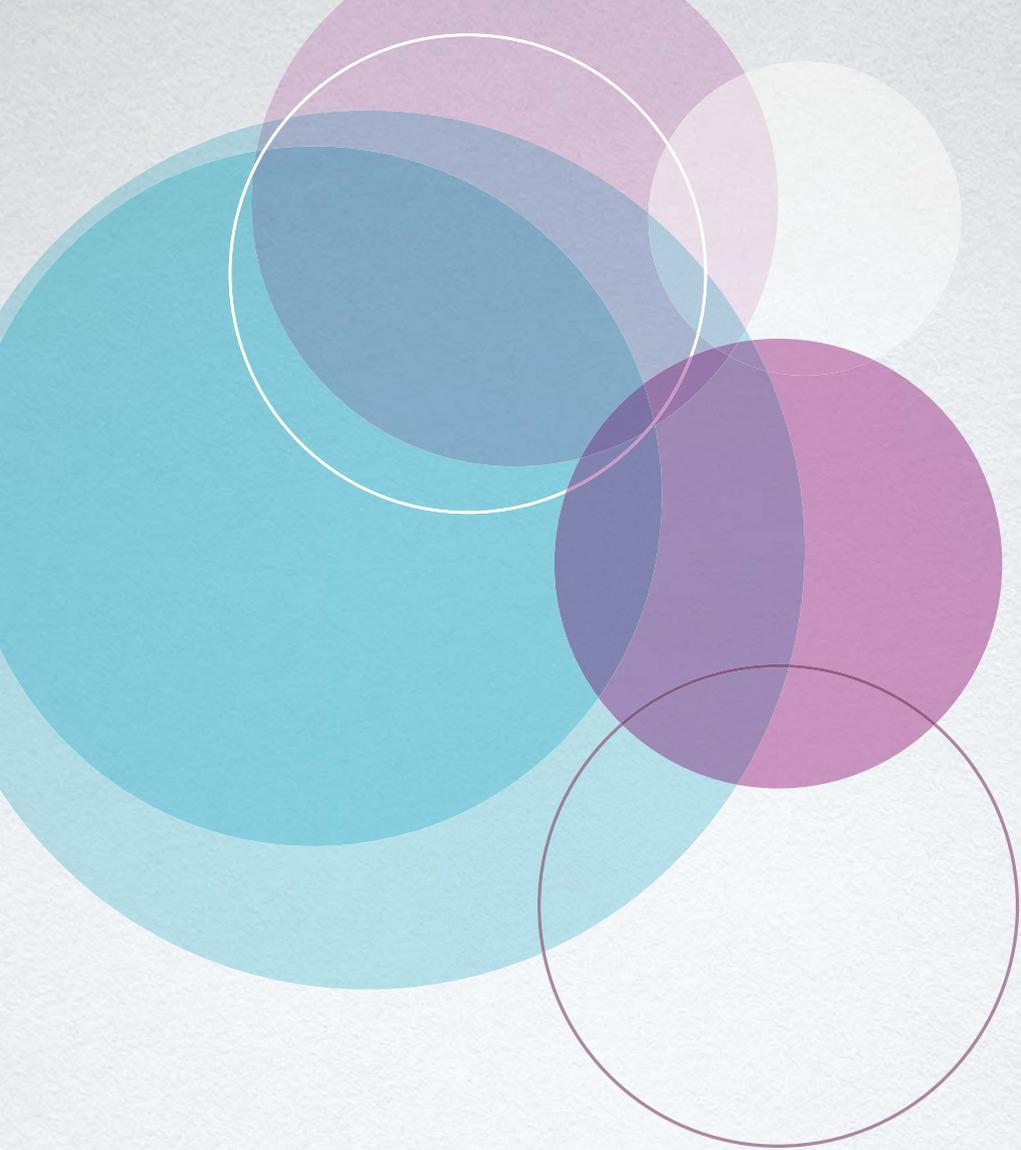
Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

**Religious Group**

Contact person: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Name	To Inform/To Do	Contact



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*Leave*  
**WELL**

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