

Understanding and Coping with Neonatal Death: Support and Guidance for Parents



Highlights

A neonatal (newborn) death is when a baby dies within 4 weeks of their birth. Dealing with a neonatal death can be extremely difficult. Help is available from your doctor, midwife, child health nurse and social worker. There are also many support services available to help you.

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What Does Neonatal Death Mean?

A neonatal death occurs when a baby dies within the first 4 weeks (28 days)

after birth. It is also referred to as a newborn death. The majority of neonatal deaths take place within the first week after birth.

Neonatal death is distinct from stillbirth. Stillbirth refers to the death of a baby that occurs after 20 weeks of pregnancy but before birth.

Neonatal death, while rare, can be a very challenging experience for parents and families. There is support available to help navigate the emotional and practical aspects of this tragic event.

Common Causes of Neonatal Death

The reasons for a neonatal death may not always be clear. However, certain factors can increase the risk of a baby passing away in the neonatal period. These include:

Premature birth

Low birthweight

Congenital disorders (medical conditions present from birth)

Additionally, the risk of neonatal death can be higher if complications arise during pregnancy. It may also be connected to issues encountered during labor.

Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy (SUDI) is a term used to describe the sudden and unexplained death of a baby under 12 months of age. Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) is a specific category of SUDI that remains unexplained after thorough investigation.

Coping With Loss: What to Expect

Losing a baby can be an incredibly painful and heartbreaking experience. Parents who experience a neonatal death often report feeling:

Shocked and devastated

Isolated or alone

Guilty or self-blaming

Disbelief that their baby has passed away

Anxious

Grief is a unique and personal journey. Each individual may experience different emotions at various points, and it's important to remember that grief can evolve over time. Having a strong support network can significantly help manage the grieving process.

Grief can also manifest physically in several ways, such as:

Loss of appetite

Headaches

Tummy aches

Insomnia \ (difficulty sleeping)

It's common for your body to produce breast milk after a neonatal death, which can be both physically and emotionally uncomfortable. There are various support options available to help manage this process, including guidance from midwives, lactation consultants, and child health nurses.

If you experience any of the following symptoms, contact your doctor:

Painful, swollen, or warm breasts

Development of a fever

Some parents may also choose to donate expressed milk to a milk bank, which helps premature or ill babies in need of breast milk.

Your body will also go through several physical changes similar to those experienced after childbirth. For more information on physical changes after a neonatal death, consider seeking support or guidance from healthcare professionals.

Next Steps After a Neonatal Loss

Dealing with the loss of your baby can be overwhelming. There are practical matters that need to be addressed, which may seem even more difficult while grieving. However, there are ways to manage these tasks.

One important step is making funeral arrangements, which will need to be

organized. It is also required by law to register the birth and death of your baby with the appropriate authorities.

These steps can be emotionally taxing, but there are support services available to help you through this process. Hospital social workers or maternal child health nurses can provide valuable assistance and guide you through these difficult decisions. Leaning on your family and friends for support during this time can also help ease the burden.

Some parents find it important to understand the reasons behind their baby's death. Speaking with the healthcare professionals involved in your care can provide some clarity and peace of mind.

Autopsy: Understanding the Cause of Death

In some cases, parents may opt for an autopsy, a post-mortem examination conducted to determine the cause of death. Autopsies can offer insight into why a baby passed away, although sometimes no definitive cause can be found, even after this examination.

It's important to note that an autopsy cannot be performed without the parents' consent. If you choose to have an autopsy, you can decide the level of detail you wish it to include. The process may involve only examining the baby's body or may include more extensive testing, such as organ removal for further examination.

If the case is referred to a coroner due to suspicious circumstances or concerns regarding the healthcare received, an autopsy may be performed without parental consent.

Before agreeing to an autopsy, it can be helpful to discuss the pros and cons with a doctor, midwife, or social worker, who can guide you through the process and address any questions you may have.

Creating Memories

Creating lasting memories of your baby can be a helpful way to process your grief and honor your child. Some ways to create memories include:

Taking photographs with your baby
Holding and cuddling your baby
Keeping a lock of their hair
Creating handprints or footprints
Saving cards or drying flowers received from friends and family
Writing in a journal to express your feelings

Additionally, some parents find comfort in creating a memorial for their baby.
You may choose to:

Plant a tree in their memory
Pick a song that reminds you of your baby
Choose a special item to keep in remembrance

These gestures can be meaningful ways to remember your baby and start the healing process.

Taking Your Time

It is natural to want to spend time with your baby, even after their death. Many parents choose to take their baby home or visit them at the funeral home before making arrangements. It is important to take as much time as you need during this period.

When you feel ready, you can say goodbye. The hospital or a funeral director can assist with transporting your baby to the funeral home when the time comes.

Emotional Healing and Support

Grieving the loss of a baby can feel isolating, but it is important to seek emotional support during this time. You do not have to go through this alone. Reaching out to others, whether it's family, friends, or support groups, can help you feel less alone and more supported.

Family and Friends

The death of a baby impacts the entire family. Many parents find comfort in

inviting family members to meet the baby and spend time together. If you have other children, it may be helpful to involve them as well, to help them understand the loss and support each other as a family.

It is also okay to grieve privately. Everyone experiences grief in their own way and at their own pace. If you do not feel ready to see people, it is okay to wait until you are ready to accept support.

Support Groups

Connecting with other parents who have experienced neonatal death can be comforting. Sharing your feelings with people who have gone through a similar loss can provide valuable support. There are in-person and online support groups available where you can meet others who understand your grief.

Your Partner

Both parents will likely experience grief in different ways, and this can sometimes strain the relationship. It's important to communicate openly and support each other during this challenging time.

To navigate the grieving process together, consider:

Open, honest communication
Supporting each other through the grief process

Financial Help After Loss

In some cases, parents may be eligible for government support after the loss of a baby. Bereavement payments and other financial benefits may be available for up to 14 weeks after the neonatal death.

For more information on available financial assistance, you can check with local government services or support organizations.

Tools and Assistance

Grief Counseling Services Professional grief counselors can provide emotional

support, helping individuals and families navigate the emotional complexities of neonatal loss. These counselors offer a safe space to express feelings and process grief.

Support Groups Many communities offer support groups for parents who have experienced neonatal death. These groups provide an opportunity to connect with others who are going through similar experiences, fostering a sense of community and shared understanding.

Lactation Consultants and Midwives If you are experiencing issues with breastfeeding or lactation after the loss of your baby, a lactation consultant or midwife can help. They can guide you in managing milk production, offering emotional and practical support.

Hospital Social Workers Hospital social workers can assist with navigating the practical aspects after a neonatal death, such as funeral arrangements, paperwork, and ensuring that you receive all necessary support. They can also provide referrals to local resources.

Bereavement Services Many hospitals and funeral homes offer specialized bereavement services. These services can help with memorial planning, creating lasting memories of your child, and ensuring that you have emotional support throughout the grieving process.

Financial Support and Benefits Information Local government and charitable organizations may provide financial support or bereavement assistance following the loss of a baby. It's important to reach out to these resources to understand your options for support during this challenging time.