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# WHAT TO DO WHEN SOMEONE DIES: FIRST 24 HOURS CHECKLIST

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Use this guide to navigate the essential tasks in the first day after a death



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MEMORIAL MERITS  
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## FIRST 24 HOURS AFTER DEATH - CHECKLIST (PDF FORMAT)

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### WHAT TO DO WHEN SOMEONE DIES: FIRST 24 HOURS CHECKLIST

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**IMMEDIATE ACTIONS CHECKLIST** *Use this guide to navigate the essential tasks in the first day after a death*

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#### ☐ STEP 1: OBTAIN OFFICIAL PRONOUNCEMENT OF DEATH

##### **If death occurred at home with hospice:**

- ☐ Call hospice nurse (they will pronounce death)
- ☐ Follow hospice guidance for next steps
- ☐ Allow hospice to handle initial documentation

##### **If death occurred at home without hospice:**

- ☐ Call 911 or local emergency number
- ☐ If death was expected, inform responders and provide physician documentation
- ☐ Cooperate with any police response (standard protocol)

##### **If death occurred in hospital or care facility:**

- ☐ Speak with medical staff about pronouncement
- ☐ Request death certificate documentation
- ☐ Ask to speak with social worker or patient advocate

##### **If death was unexpected or in public:**

- ☐ Emergency services will respond
- ☐ Medical examiner or coroner may need to investigate
- ☐ Body will be released after examination

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## **☐ STEP 2: NOTIFY IMMEDIATE FAMILY**

### **Priority notifications (within first few hours):**

- ☐ Spouse or partner
- ☐ Children (adult and minor)
- ☐ Parents or siblings of deceased
- ☐ Anyone the deceased specifically wanted notified
- ☐ Close friends who should know immediately

### **Helpful tips:**

- ☐ Designate one person as central contact to notify others
- ☐ Ask someone to help make calls if you're overwhelmed
- ☐ Keep initial calls brief; details can come later

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## **☐ STEP 3: UNDERSTAND BODY TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS**

### **Know your timeframe:**

- ☐ Understand you typically have several hours (not minutes)
- ☐ You are NOT required to call funeral home immediately
- ☐ Hospital/facility can hold body temporarily
- ☐ Allow time for family to gather if desired

### **Transportation choices:**

- ☐ Funeral home (traditional option)
- ☐ Direct disposition service (cremation/burial only)
- ☐ Medical examiner facility (if required)

- ☐ Understand once you choose, that facility typically handles services

**Before authorizing transport:**

- ☐ Ask which funeral home or service
  - ☐ Understand you can choose where body goes
  - ☐ Don't feel rushed into immediate decision
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**☐ STEP 4: SECURE THE RESIDENCE AND BELONGINGS**

**If deceased lived alone or death occurred at home:**

**Physical security:**

- ☐ Lock all doors and windows
- ☐ Consider changing locks if keys were distributed
- ☐ Ensure property is secured if you cannot stay there

**Valuables and important items:**

- ☐ Secure jewelry and valuables
- ☐ Locate important documents
- ☐ Secure or safely dispose of medications
- ☐ Protect financial documents and statements

**Pets:**

- ☐ Arrange immediate care for any pets
- ☐ Ensure pets have food and water
- ☐ Contact family/friends who can help with pet care
- ☐ Consider temporary boarding if necessary

**Property maintenance:**

- ☐ Decide on utilities (keep on or adjust)
  - ☐ Maintain security system if present
  - ☐ Remove perishable food if home will be vacant
  - ☐ Arrange for mail collection
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## ☐ **STEP 5: GATHER ESSENTIAL DOCUMENTS**

### **Immediate priority documents (locate within 24 hours):**

- ☐ Government-issued ID (driver's license, passport)
- ☐ Social Security card or number
- ☐ Will or trust documents
- ☐ Any advance directives or funeral wishes
- ☐ Insurance policies (life, burial, final expense)

### **Important but can gather over next few days:**

- ☐ Birth certificate
- ☐ Marriage certificate (if applicable)
- ☐ Military discharge papers (DD-214) if veteran
- ☐ Bank account information
- ☐ Credit card information
- ☐ Investment account information
- ☐ Property deeds and vehicle titles
- ☐ Tax records

### **Document storage:**

- ☐ Keep all documents in secure, organized location

- ☐ Make copies of critical documents
  - ☐ Note where original documents are stored
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## **☐ STEP 6: IMMEDIATE DECISION CONSIDERATIONS**

### **Autopsy (if applicable):**

- ☐ Understand if autopsy is legally required (you have no choice)
- ☐ Consider optional autopsy if questions about cause of death
- ☐ Communicate religious/personal objections if autopsy is optional
- ☐ Understand optional autopsies have costs

### **Organ and tissue donation (time-sensitive):**

- ☐ Check if deceased was registered donor
  - ☐ Hospital will contact organ procurement automatically if registered
  - ☐ Consider donation if it aligns with deceased's likely wishes
  - ☐ Know donation doesn't prevent open-casket services
  - ☐ Understand family pays no costs for donation
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## **☐ STEP 7: ESSENTIAL NOTIFICATIONS (WITHIN 24 HOURS)**

### **Who needs to know immediately:**

- ☐ Deceased's employer (if currently employed)
- ☐ Deceased's closest friends
- ☐ Clergy or spiritual advisor (if applicable)
- ☐ Landlord (if deceased rented residence)

### **Notifications that CAN WAIT several days:**

- ☐ Extended family and distant friends
  - ☐ Social Security Administration
  - ☐ Medicare/Medicaid
  - ☐ Banks and financial institutions
  - ☐ Credit card companies
  - ☐ Insurance companies (other than death claim)
  - ☐ Subscriptions and membership services
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#### **☐ STEP 8: ACCEPT HELP AND DELEGATE**

**When people ask "How can I help?" assign specific tasks:**

- ☐ "Can you call these people for me?"
- ☐ "Could you pick up groceries?"
- ☐ "Would you stay here while I go to the funeral home?"
- ☐ "Can you help me find these documents?"
- ☐ "Could you pick up relatives from the airport?"
- ☐ "Would you coordinate meals for the next few days?"

**Accept practical support:**

- ☐ Allow others to bring food
  - ☐ Let people handle household tasks
  - ☐ Accept offers to watch children
  - ☐ Allow friends to field phone calls
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## **☐ STEP 9: BASIC SELF-CARE**

### **Physical needs:**

- ☐ Eat something (even if not hungry)
- ☐ Drink water regularly
- ☐ Rest or sleep if possible
- ☐ Take any of your regular medications

### **Emotional acknowledgment:**

- ☐ Accept that however you feel is valid
- ☐ Understand shock and numbness are normal
- ☐ Know that difficulty concentrating is expected
- ☐ Allow yourself to cry (or not cry)
- ☐ Recognize physical symptoms (headache, nausea, exhaustion) are normal grief responses

### **Reach out if needed:**

- ☐ Call a trusted friend or family member
- ☐ Contact clergy or spiritual advisor
- ☐ Call crisis support if experiencing mental health crisis: 988
- ☐ Use 24/7 grief support resources if needed

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## **WHAT DOES NOT NEED TO HAPPEN IN 24 HOURS**

### **Give yourself permission to wait on these:**

- ☐ Complete funeral planning (basic decisions sufficient for now)
- ☐ Writing and publishing obituary
- ☐ Closing bank accounts



- ☐ Canceling credit cards
- ☐ Sorting through belongings
- ☐ Cleaning out residence
- ☐ Making major irreversible decisions
- ☐ Notifying every person and organization
- ☐ Having all answers figured out

**Remember: You only need to handle immediate essentials today. Everything else can wait.**

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#### **QUICK REFERENCE: WHO TO CALL**

**Medical emergencies/pronouncement:** 911

**Crisis support:** 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) or text HELLO to 741741

**Social Security (for future notification):** 1-800-772-1213

**FTC Funeral Rule information:** <https://consumer.ftc.gov/articles/ftc-funeral-rule>

**24/7 AI grief support:** <https://memorialmerits.com/solace>

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## NOTES & QUESTIONS

Use this space for important information, phone numbers, or tasks:

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## CONTACTS TO RECORD

**Funeral home selected:** Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

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

**Family point person coordinating:** Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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

**Deceased's attorney (if applicable):** Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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

**Other important contacts:**

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## REMEMBER:

✓ There is no "perfect" way to handle the first 24 hours ✓ You are doing your best in an impossible situation ✓ Asking for help is not weakness—it's wisdom ✓ Many tasks can wait until you're thinking more clearly ✓ Support and resources are available when you need them

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Download more free funeral planning resources at [MemorialMerits.com](https://www.MemorialMerits.com)

Read the complete article: "[What to Do When Someone Dies: First 24 Hours Checklist](#)"

Need immediate support? Talk to Solace 24/7 at [MemorialMerits.com/meet-solace/](https://www.MemorialMerits.com/meet-solace/)

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