

What happens after a child dies suddenly

A summary of the formal process in England for families

When a child (under the age of 18) dies suddenly, and the reason is not immediately clear, a formal process begins. It usually takes much longer than families expect – many months, and sometimes more than a year. This summary explains the different stages and some of the terms you may come across, to help you understand what to expect.

Remember, you don't have to face any of this on your own. The charities listed below have supported many families through this process, and you are welcome to contact any of them at any point.



In the first few days

The coroner is told

Hospital staff will tell your local coroner that your child has died, and the coroner decides whether to lead an investigation. For nearly all sudden and unexpected child deaths, they do. This is standard, and does not mean that anyone is under suspicion. If an investigation is not needed, a final death certificate can be issued.

The investigation or inquest opens

You will be told when the coroner opens an investigation or an inquest. An inquest is an investigation that usually ends with a formal public hearing.

When you first speak to the coroner's office, tell them how you would prefer to be contacted. Some families find an unexpected call very hard to take. You could ask them to text or email you asking you to ring back, so that you can choose a moment that suits you.

A Joint Agency Response, and your key worker

Doctors, police and other local professionals meet, in person or online, to share what they know. This is called a Joint Agency Response. At this meeting a key worker is identified, whose role is to explain what happens next and help you get the support you need. It may be someone who does this work full time, or your GP, a nurse, a health visitor, or another professional you already know. If you're not sure who your key worker is, ask any professional already involved.

If you need additional support, you can also turn to charities such as SUDC UK and CRY.

Gathering information

From the very beginning, the coroner and the police gather information about the circumstances of your child's death – medical records, and accounts of what happened beforehand. The police are always involved at the start, and how involved they remain depends on the circumstances. This too is routine. You have the right to ask to see any of the evidence gathered, if you want to. The coroner will decide what can be shared.

If you need proof of death

Every death must be registered, but if there is an investigation this cannot happen until the cause of death has been settled. In the meantime, if you need something in

writing – for an employer, a bank, or anything else – the coroner's office can give you an interim certificate. You only need to ask.

The post-mortem examination

What happens

A specialist doctor called a pathologist will examine your child to try to find out why they died. This is called a post-mortem examination or autopsy. It involves a physical examination, and some small samples are sent away for testing. Your child may need to be moved to another hospital so that a pathologist with the right expertise can carry out the examination.

Deciding about samples

Usually a week or two afterwards, you may be asked to sign a form about what you would like to happen to the samples taken. This can feel confusing at a time when very little feels clear. You can watch a short video explaining the form at sudc.org.uk/retention.

Further tests

Depending on the circumstances and your child's medical and family history, your child may need specialist tests, or a sample of DNA may be taken to enable future genetic testing. If a genetic condition is suspected, close family members should understand the importance of screening and assessment, to check if they are at risk of an inherited condition. The coroner and your key worker can explain this to you.

After the post-mortem examination

After you have decided what should happen to the samples, and the post-mortem examination has been completed, you may be able to hold a funeral or ceremony for your child. In some cases further examinations are needed, so you may need to wait a little longer.



Waiting for results – the post-mortem report

This part of the process can take many months. Results are sent to the pathologist, who writes a final report for the coroner describing the circumstances of the death, what the examination found, and their conclusions about the cause.

The coroner's office will then send the report to you. You can decide in advance how you would like to receive it. It is written in medical language, so some families ask for it to go straight to their key worker, paediatrician or GP, who can go through it with them. Others prefer it to be sent to their home or email address, with warning beforehand. Tell your key worker or the coroner's officer what you would prefer.

Reaching a decision

The coroner's decision

Once the report is in, the coroner decides whether the case can be closed. If it can, they confirm the cause of death and the death can be registered. For some families the investigation ends here. For others there will be a formal inquest hearing, held in person or online.

If there is an inquest

An inquest is a legal process, but not a criminal one. No one is on trial. You can be legally represented if you wish, as can others involved. Legal aid is not usually available to families, though it may be in Article 2 inquests, which are more detailed investigations into deaths where a public body may have had a duty to protect a person's life. The charities below can help you work out whether this might apply to you.

There are usually several steps towards the final hearing, at which witnesses may be called and questioned. At the end, the coroner gives a conclusion describing the cause of your child's death.

The Child Death Review Meeting

At some point, the professionals involved in your child's care, both before and after they died, meet to review everything that is known. This is called a Child Death Review Meeting. Its purpose is to understand why your child died, and to identify anything that might prevent future deaths or improve local care.

Your key worker attends and can take your questions, as well as any feedback of your experiences, into the meeting and bring answers back to you. You can ask when it will be and tell your key worker anything you would like raised.

The final death certificate

Once the coroner has closed the case, the final death certificate can be issued. The cause of death will be taken from the post-mortem report or the coroner's conclusion, and it is this cause that will be recorded and used by the ONS for statistical purposes. The coroner will tell you whether there is anything you need to do, or whether they will register the death on your behalf.

Where to find more support

This process often takes many months, and sometimes more than a year. The charities listed here can explain things in more detail, help with your questions, and support you for as long as you need.

For fuller information, including in other languages, see 'When a child dies: a guide for parents and carers', published by the National Child Mortality Database, at ncmd.info/publications/when-a-child-dies-a-guide-for-parents-and-carers.



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