

POST-MORTEM CARE

AT DEATH

- Absence of breathing and lung sounds
- Absence of both apical and carotid pulse
- Lack of reflex or response to stimulus, including pupils that are fixed or dilated

WHAT TO DO WITH THE BODY

- Notify appropriate people
- Nurse will pronounce the death
- Follow your policy/procedure
 - Special considerations – organ donation, autopsy, cultural/religious needs
- Gather “death pack” gloves, soap, cloths, bandages, incontinence pad, etc.
- Follow standard precautions
- Close door/curtain
- Elevate head of bed
- Maintain alignment; palms face down or across abdomen, legs aligned
- Place dentures in mouth, replace prosthesis if applicable
- Remove O2, tubing, IV’s, etc.
- Give bath, clean gown/clothes, comb, shave, etc.
- Place incontinence pad under hips

THREE CATEGORIES THAT WILL OCCUR IN THE BODY AT TIME OF DEATH

ALGOR MORTIS (latin: coldness of death), occurs from lack of circulation.

Hypothalamus stops functioning and the body’s core temperature begins to drop by about 1.8 degrees every hour until it reaches a stasis at room temperature. Skin begins to lose its elasticity as the body cools. The body should be handled gently.

POST-MORTEM DECOMPOSITION refers to bruising and softening of the body that is largely related to the breakdown of RBC’s. The cells breakdown, the Hgb is released resulting in a staining effect on the tissues. Mottling or bruising then occurs, mostly on dependent parts of the body. The face most often appears purple in color when death is the result of cardiac complications. The remainder of the body takes on a gray hue.

RIGOR MORTIS (latin: stiffness of death), happens about 3-6 hours after death.

Starts in the head and goes down to the feet. Occurs as a result of a chemical change in the muscles, causing them to become stiff and difficult to manipulate.

TIPS

- Leave the hands available for family to reach out and touch
- Close eyes, if unable to, moisten cotton balls and place on eyelids for a few minutes, this should make it possible to close them
- Place a small rolled towel under the chin if the mouth will not stay closed
- The body can start to stiffen in as little as 10 minutes or take up to 6 hours. Try to get them settled before muscles start to stiffen
- Make sure room is clean, leave as little evidence as possible; trash, soiled linens, remove equipment
- Give the family space, dim the lights, have tissues available, have enough seating
- Offer to call chaplain/spiritual care

