

## **Stillbirth - information and support**

### **What is a stillbirth?**

When a baby dies after 24 weeks of pregnancy and before or during birth, it is known as a stillbirth.

The loss of a baby before 24 weeks of pregnancy is classed as a miscarriage. However, this is simply terminology for legal purposes. Many mums who have a late miscarriage also give birth to their baby and, understandably, feel that it should be called a stillbirth.

If the unthinkable has happened and you have been told that your baby has died in the womb before labour has started, the options for giving birth will be raised with you and the baby's father.

It is likely to be very difficult to process anything you are told at this point because of the overwhelming shock of being told your baby has died. It can be helpful to ask another person – such as a parent or friend – as well as your partner, to be with you while you talk to doctors and midwives about the next steps.

If there's no medical reason for the baby to be born straight away, it may be possible to wait for labour to start naturally. You might not need to decide immediately. It may be possible to go home for a day or two first.

Legally, it is the mother's decision how she decides to give birth to her baby. This information is, therefore, directed at mums but we hope dads will find it useful too

## **Supporting each other**

Stillbirth is one of the most devastating experiences any family can go through. We all grieve differently and this can be difficult for couples when their baby dies. Most relationships come under pressure with the loss of a loved one and the overwhelming grief after the death of a child can drive couples apart as much as it can bring them together.

## **Grieving differently**

Your grief can blind you to your partner's pain, especially if they have different ways of dealing with the grief. Your partner might want to go back to work, while you cannot even get out of bed. You might cry all the time, while your partner has barely shed a tear. These different physical and emotional responses can cause huge tension. Some mothers find it difficult to handle their partner's lack of tears and visible distress. It is easy to misinterpret this as them caring less or feeling less. Try to respect these differences and not read too much into them. On the other hand some women may be disturbed to see their partner cry or sob uncontrollably if this is something they have never done before.

All of the above are normal and yet only scratch the surface. Remember to be kind to each other and never expect too much. Communication is key, even if it makes you uncomfortable.

## **Planning a funeral for your stillborn baby**

Planning a funeral for your baby is one of the most traumatic things a parent will have to go through. We hope the practical information on this page will help you.

If you lose your baby after 24 weeks, their body must be buried or cremated by law. Whether or not you hold a service before the burial or cremation is your decision.

### **These are the usual options for the funeral:**

The hospital can arrange the funeral for you, free of charge, if you do choose a hospital funeral, much of the paperwork and decision-making will be done for you but you may find that your choices are limited. For example, some hospitals can only offer cremation, and some provide shared ceremonies or burial in a shared grave.

You can engage a funeral home to do it for you, in which case you will be supported by the funeral director, and there are now no charges for simple funerals.

You can organise the funeral yourself, liaising directly with the crematorium or cemetery.

The arrangements that you choose to make to mark your baby's death in the ceremony are very personal. You may have important religious wishes that you would like observed, or you may want a very different type of non-religious event with poetry and singing. What happens at the ceremony is your decision.

You can also choose not to be present at all and to allow the hospital and their undertaker to make all the arrangements. It might help to take some time before making this decision, and remember that you are allowed to change your mind.

### **When do I have the funeral?**

There is no specified legal time limit for the funeral, most happen within two to three weeks. Take your time to consider what you would like to do and to talk to those close to you. Your baby will be kept safely in the hospital mortuary or the funeral home until the burial or cremation. Don't feel pressured to make decisions before you are ready. It may be hard to make the decision if your partner wants different things.

Be aware that the hospital will probably want to know if you'd like them to organise the funeral before you go home. However, the staff can let you know who to contact if you haven't yet decided at this point.

You will need to obtain a certificate of registration of a stillbirth from your local registrar. At the same time as getting this you'll also be given a form to permit burial or cremation, which you can then pass on the funeral director or hospital, depending on who is making arrangements for you.

The hospital or funeral director can help you with this and any other forms. If you are organising a separate funeral, the cemetery or crematorium staff will need the same form.

### **Taking your baby home before the funeral**

Some parents like to take their baby home before the funeral. Unless a post mortem has been ordered by a coroner or procurator fiscal, this is normal and legal. Some hospitals and mortuaries provide cold cots you can borrow to keep your baby cool at home.

### **Your rights and benefits after a stillbirth**

It can be difficult thinking about practicalities and finances when your baby has died and everything is so raw. However, it's useful to find out what support you're entitled to because it could offer you some breathing space and allow you some more quiet time to grieve before returning to work.

The hospital or community midwife should have given you a booklet called 'Late miscarriage, stillbirth, neonatal death – A guide to the financial help available', by the Money Advice Service. This breaks down all the information here in more detail.

### **For parents who lost a baby after 24 weeks, or if the baby was born alive at any stage of pregnancy and then died**

Mothers are entitled to 52 weeks' Maternity Leave

If you gave birth before your Maternity Leave started, your leave starts the day after you gave birth.

You may be entitled to Maternity Pay from your employer, Maternity Allowance, or income-related benefits from the state.

Dads, or partners, may be entitled one or two consecutive weeks' Paternity Leave from your employer. Sick Leave and Sick Pay, Compassionate Leave or

Time Off for Dependents. You will need to look at your contract and contact your employer.