

FAQs

What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is the examination of a body after death to determine the cause of death or the nature of pathological changes. An autopsy routinely includes examination of the internal organs, major anatomic structures and other areas of the body. Tissue, hair and bodily fluid samples are routinely collected during an autopsy. The extent of the examination and samples collected for further analysis are specific to each case and are determined by the Medical Examiner (Doctor) performing the autopsy examination.

Will all deaths accepted as Medical Examiner cases be examined by autopsy?

No, not all cases are examined by autopsy. External examination of a decedent's body may be performed at the discretion of the Medical Examiner (Doctor) assigned to the case. The type of examination performed depends upon the type of case and circumstances of the death. Autopsy examinations are mandated in cases when criminal violence is suspected to be a contributing factor of death. The type and extent of examination performed on a body is determined by the Medical Examiner (Doctor) performing the examination.

Do you need permission from the next of kin to perform an autopsy?

By State law, the Medical Examiner is not required to receive permission from next of kin for an autopsy that falls under the Medical Examiner's jurisdiction. Religious objections to an autopsy are handled with consultation on a case-by-case basis.

Who reports the death to the Medical Examiner's Office?

Reports of death to the Medical Examiner's Office should only be taken from law enforcement, funeral homes or medical facilities which would include hospitals, nursing homes, and hospice. If a death occurs at home, law enforcement should be contacted who will subsequently notify the Medical Examiner's Office. If you are aware or concerned that foul play is involved in a death, please contact the law enforcement agency where the person died or was injured.

What types of death should be reported to the Medical Examiner?

Jurisdictional criteria are defined by [Florida State Statute, Chapter §406.11](#), and Florida Administrative Code 11G-2. All deaths that meet the following criteria should be reported to the Medical Examiner's Office.

- Deaths due to traumatic injuries (even if admitted to a hospital or when the injury occurred long ago but still contributed to death).

- Deaths that occur suddenly, when a person is in apparent good health.
- When the decedent is not under the care of a physician or the physician is not licensed to practice medicine in the state of Florida.
- All deaths that occur in prison, jail, or in police custody are required to be reported to the Medical Examiner's Office regardless of circumstances.
- Deaths that appear suspicious, occur under unusual circumstances, are potential threats to public health or are associated with employment.
- When a person is found deceased outside of a healthcare facility.

Please contact us and report the death if there is any suspicion that the death may be due to unnatural causes.

How do I obtain a Death Certificate?

The Medical Examiner's Office cannot issue death certificates. A certified copy of the death certificate must be obtained from the [Office of Vital Statistics](#) or the funeral home handling the arrangements.

How can we get a copy of an autopsy report?

The AUTOPSY REPORT is a different document than the DEATH CERTIFICATE. The autopsy report is a document generated by our Office that details the significant findings discovered during the autopsy, microscopic analysis of tissues and, in some cases, findings of further testing. To obtain a copy of the Autopsy Report, send a written request by mail, fax or email to:

Office of the Medical Examiner

5301 S.W. 31st Avenue

Fort Lauderdale, FL 33312

Main - 954-357-5200

FAX - 954-327-6580

Email: Med_Exam_Trauma@broward.org

Requests should include the name of the deceased, date of death, the name of the person requesting the report and the mailing address of where to send the report once it is complete. There is no charge to the family for a copy of the requested autopsy report. All other requestors may be charged depending on the amount of work required to complete the request and the volume of report(s) requested. Please contact the Records Department of the Medical Examiner's Office for inquiries into obtaining other types of records.

Please Note: If the case is a homicide or still under active investigation (cause and manner of death are listed as “Pending Investigation”), an autopsy report cannot be forwarded without permission from the investigating officer or the State Attorney's Office.

What does it mean when a case is ‘pending’?

Death certificates will state ‘pending’ in the cause and manner of death sections when laboratory studies or further investigations are needed to determine the cause and/or manner of death. Each case of this type is handled independently; therefore, a specific time frame cannot be established. Most ‘pending’ cases are finalized within 12 weeks, but unusual circumstances may dictate longer timeframes. In cases that are Pending Investigation, the decedent's body is available to be released from the custody of the Medical Examiner's Office to a funeral home of the next of kin's choice immediately after the autopsy or external examination (see the next question/answer).

How long does a body remain at the Medical Examiner's facility?

In most cases, a person's body is available to be released from the custody of the Medical Examiner's Office immediately after the examination is complete (typically, the afternoon following death). The ruling of Pending Investigation as the cause and manner of death does not prevent the decedent's body from being released to a funeral home. The tissue/organ donation process, atypically high caseloads and other circumstances may delay examination of a person's body a few days; however, most decedents are able to be released 24 hours to 48 hours after the death occurs to the funeral home chosen by the legal next of kin. No unidentified body will be released from the custody of the Medical Examiner's Office until positive identification is made. The timeframe of positive identification is different in each case.

Who is the next of kin?

A decedent's next of kin or legally authorized person to make funeral arrangements is defined by [Florida State Statute, Chapter 497.005 \(39\)](#) and the District 17 Medical Examiner's Office strictly adheres to the hierarchy listed in the statute. The next of kin's signature on a body release form (typically on the letterhead of the funeral home) is required to release a decedent's body from our custody.

When can the next of kin make funeral arrangements?

We recommend that funeral arrangements be made by the next of kin as soon as possible after they become aware of the death. We understand that sometimes circumstances dictate that funeral arrangements cannot be made shortly after death so deceased

individuals can remain in storage at the Medical Examiner's facility for a number of days to accommodate for unusual circumstances.

How do I claim a body?

The legal next of kin as defined by [Florida State Statute, Chapter 497.005 \(39\)](#) should contact a funeral home or crematorium, make final arrangements and sign a written release giving the Medical Examiner's Office permission to release the body. Contact the funeral home for further details.

Do I need to identify my loved ones at the morgue?

In most circumstances, you do not need to identify a body at the morgue. Most deceased persons are identified on scene by Law Enforcement utilizing visual comparison with known identification images (State Identification Card, Passport Photographs, etc...). When a person is not visually identifiable, positive identification via scientific means is performed. Circumstances that dictate visual identification of deceased persons at the Medical Examiner's Office by family and/or friends are rare. Please contact us regarding the identity and/or how identification of a deceased person was made prior to traveling to our Office. Viewing of the decedent's remains at the District 17 Medical Examiner's Office is prohibited and photography is utilized in rare circumstances that visual identification by family and/or friends is necessary.

What happens to personal property brought in with a body?

If personal effects are transported with a body, they are inventoried and turned over to the funeral home to return to the family. In the cases of homicides, all personal effects are turned over to law enforcement as evidence (unless law enforcement instructs our Office to release a specific item to the family). If the next of kin is not located, the personal property will be handled as follows:

- Any cash will be turned over to the County government where the death occurred for proper disposition.
- Any property that has negligible or no reasonably discernable monetary value will be retained for one year and then be destroyed after documenting due diligence in trying to locate next of kin.
- Any property that has a monetary value will be retained for one year and then turned over to the County government where the death occurred for proper disposition.

Who gives permission for organ and/or tissue donation?

Only the legal next of kin may grant permission for organ and/or tissue donation. Once permission from the decedent's legal next of kin is obtained, the Medical Examiner (Doctor) assigned to the case will determine if donation may proceed without compromising the duties of this Office. In rare cases, a Medical Examiner's objection may be invoked to protect evidence. The policy of the District 17 Medical Examiner's Office accommodates the donation process, and we make every effort not to make an objection to organ or tissue donation against the wishes of the next of kin. Please contact the Organ Procurement Organization of your choice for further details regarding the donation process.

Does the Medical Examiner's Office provide burial assistance?

No monetary disbursement is provided by the District 17 Medical Examiner's Office to assist with funeral expenses. Please contact us if you are the next of kin and are unable to provide funeral arrangements due to financial hardship.