

Autopsy

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What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is a medical examination of the body of a dead person. In the procedure, a doctor cuts open the body and looks at the organs. He or she takes samples and looks at them under a microscope. What the doctor finds can answer many questions. Autopsies are done for several reasons:

- To answer questions about a person's illness.
- To tell how and why the person died.
- For education and research.
- To assist in legal cases.

Specially trained doctors, called pathologists, perform autopsies. Pathologists are experts in looking at body tissues and fluids.

Who may request an autopsy?

You can request an autopsy if you are the person's next of kin or the legally responsible party. You will need to sign a consent form to give permission for the autopsy. Reasons you may ask for an autopsy include:

- Doctors can't tell you why the person died.
- The death occurred without warning during medical treatment.
- There could be genetic problems that other family members could be at risk for.
- The cause of death could have an impact on legal matters.

You may limit the autopsy in any manner you wish. For example, you can restrict it to a specific organ or area of the body.

A medical examiner can order an autopsy without the family's permission. This can happen if the cause of death is unclear or suspicious.

What is the procedure for an autopsy?

First, the pathologist looks at the outside of the body. He or she looks for clues about the cause of death. Next, they examine the internal organs. They cut a Y or U shape into the chest and down the abdomen. They look at the organs. They take samples as needed to look at under a microscope. They may remove the organs completely to examine them.

They may also run toxicology or other lab tests. These tests check for drugs or chemicals in the blood, urine or saliva. When they are finished observing and testing, everything is returned to the body. Then the body is sewn up. Sometimes the organs are kept for teaching and research.

The autopsy takes from 2 to 4 hours. The autopsy room looks similar to an operating room. An atmosphere of dignity and respect for the deceased is maintained at all times.

When will the results of an autopsy be known?

The first findings from an autopsy are usually ready in 2 to 3 days. The doctor can review these results with you. Detailed studies are then performed on tissue samples. This could take up to many weeks. A final report will be written. The doctor will also review this report with you, as well.

What does an autopsy cost?

Autopsies help doctors learn more about illness and ways to improve medical care. So some are performed without charge. These can include those done at the hospital where the person died. Some teaching hospitals also will do autopsies at no charge, even if the person died somewhere else. But many hospitals do charge for autopsies. Make sure you understand what the charges are before you request the procedure. You do not have to pay for an autopsy if it is required by law.

Some private pathologists offer their services through newspapers, funeral homes, or online. You would also have to pay for their services. It is unknown whether they are as objective and trustworthy as a general hospital or academic medical center.

Things to consider

Some people are afraid an autopsy will interfere with the funeral. This is not the case. The procedure can be completed in just a few hours. Once the autopsy is completed, the hospital tells the funeral home. So it does not delay funeral services. In addition, the incisions are not visible once the body has been embalmed and prepared by the mortician. So you can still have an open casket funeral after an autopsy.

Questions to ask your doctor

- Should my loved one have an autopsy?
- What will the pathologist look for?
- How long will it take to get the results?
- Will it disfigure my loved one?
- Who do I contact if I want to donate his or her organs to science?