



IWK Health

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**Information for Families about
Post-mortem Examinations
and Autopsy**

1. What does *post-mortem examination* mean?

Post-mortem means “after death”. *Examination* means a medical test or procedure to find information.

2. What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is a type of post-mortem procedure. An autopsy is a careful examination of the body after death. Usually this involves:

- examination of the outside of the body
- examination of the organs inside the body
- related tests to find out more information

3. Who decides whether post-mortem examinations are done?

Sometimes an autopsy must be done because it is legally required by the provincial Medical Examiner’s office. This may be called a forensic autopsy. (See *Note* at the end of this guide.)

In other cases, the family of the person who died is able to choose whether post-mortem examinations or an autopsy are done. The person making this choice must be legally allowed to do so. This is usually the closest relative (“next of kin”) who is of age. Or it may be a legal substitute decision-maker.

At our hospital, the closest relative of age is usually a parent (mother or father).

4. How might an autopsy or other post-mortem examinations help our family?

Depending on the situation, information from these tests may:

- Help explain what caused the death.
- Rule out possible causes of death.
- Give information about genetic or inherited diseases that could happen again in your family.
- Give information to the doctors and nurses so they can learn from the death.
- Give information to advance medical research.

It is important to know that testing may not answer every question. In some cases, there may remain questions that could not be answered.

5. Do we have to agree to an autopsy?

Unless a forensic autopsy is required by law (see *Note* at the end of this guide), this choice is up to the family of the deceased person.

- You can choose to have no testing, some testing, or all available testing.

6. How do we decide on having which kinds of examinations?

Your doctor, nurses, and other people on your care team can advise you. They can answer your questions. They can help you choose what you will consent to

(give your permission for). Your options (choices) may include:

- a) **Complete post-mortem examination** means looking at the outside of the body, and the inside (including all organs); and taking small samples to look at under a microscope. Other tests usually include x-rays and genetic tests. This option (of complete post-mortem examination) includes your permission to take out whole organs that need more detailed study. Some organs may need to be kept in the laboratory for a longer period of time (sometimes weeks). This is required for detailed examination of the brain and spinal cord (central nervous system).
- b) **General post-mortem examination** means looking at the outside and the inside of the body, and taking small samples to look at under a microscope. However, you are *not* giving permission for whole organs (for example, the brain) to be kept in the laboratory for longer periods or more detailed study.
- c) **External-only post-mortem examination** means *no* cutting into the body. The outside of the body can be examined and x-rays can be taken. But only external sampling (for example, from umbilical cord or placenta) can be used for genetic testing.
- d) **Directed post-mortem examination** means you give specific permission to do or not do any parts of the examination. You and your doctor can figure out the best choices in your situation.

7. Will our decision about an autopsy affect our choices about organ and/or tissue donation?

No, you can still choose to make organ and/or tissue donations. Any autopsy examinations can occur after organ or tissue donation. The autopsy team will coordinate with the organ or tissue donation team.

8. Can we view the body afterwards, or have an open-casket funeral?

Yes. If you give permission for internal examination, the only incisions made upon the body are on the chest/abdomen and the back of the head. The incisions can be covered by clothing at a funeral.

9. Will we have to delay funeral, burial, or cremation?

Usually, funeral arrangements will be delayed by no more than one day after death (no matter what kind of post-mortem examinations are chosen). Please tell your health care team if it is important in your culture or religion to arrange for a faster burial. They will try to accommodate requests even if you want an autopsy.

10. When will we know the autopsy results?

An early (preliminary) report will be sent to your doctor(s) within one week. However, the final report usually takes 2 to 3 months. You can make an appointment to discuss the final report with your doctor after they receive it. The pathologist will write their

report with the goal of answering questions you or your doctors may have about the death.

11. What if we have more questions?

We know it is a difficult time for you to make decisions. All of your questions or concerns are important. A doctor, nurse, social worker, or spiritual care worker will be available to answer any questions. Your decisions about an autopsy will be respected. They will not change the level of care given to you or your deceased loved one.

12. Are there any costs for autopsy?

There is no cost to you for an autopsy.

❖ Note - The information below is *only* for family members whose loved one will have an autopsy done by the NS Medical Examiner:

The Nova Scotia Medical Examiner Service is involved in sudden and unexpected deaths, even those without suspicious circumstances. If this applies to your loved one, Medical Examiner Service staff will contact the next of kin. They will explain their involvement. If you have any questions before or after that contact, call the Nova Scotia Medical Examiner Service at **902-424-2722** (local) or **1-888-424-4336** (toll-free NS).

**This patient/family guide should not be used to replace advice from your health care provider(s).*

**Le présent guide ne devrait pas remplacer les conseils de vos fournisseurs de soins de santé.*

**Please, no scented products or fragrances at the IWK. / * Prière de ne pas porter de parfum et de ne pas utiliser de produits parfumés au IWK.*

IWK Pathology, Halifax, NS
PL-0128 Last Update / Dernière mise à jour: 01/23;
Next Review / Prochaine révision: January 2026