

Must I do anything differently if a baby dies unexpectedly?

No. You will be provided with additional services following this tragic event. The major cause of death in babies from one month to one year of age is Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). A diagnosis of SIDS is made when the sudden death of an infant remains unexplained after a thorough investigation is undertaken. In these cases, the SIDS Center of New Jersey shall be notified of the death. The center provides counseling and bereavement services to the family which has suffered this tragic loss. You may contact the SIDS Center of NJ at their **Hotline 800-545-7437**.

Can a Medical Examiner case be an organ or tissue donor?

Yes. The Medical Examiner's office works closely with organ procurement agencies. If the family wishes to donate organs or tissue, they need to give permission which can be done by calling **800-SHARE-NJ** (800-742-7365). The Medical Examiner will consider the family's desire and the need to preserve vital evidence in criminal cases.

Where can I obtain the death certificate and autopsy report?

Death Certificates are issued by the local Municipal or County Registrar or the State Registrar of the Health Department. The Medical Examiner is not able to issue death certificates. Sometimes, additional information such as toxicological testing may be needed to determine the cause of death. In such cases, the cause of death will be listed on the death certificate as Pending (further studies). A pending certificate will allow the family to proceed with burial arrangements, however, a finalized death certificate is often necessary for the management of the estate. Reports generally take from eight to twelve weeks to be finalized but may take longer depending on the circumstances and the need for specialized testing.

When a case is investigated by the Medical Examiner, a report of examination may be created. If permitted by law, this report may be obtained by writing to the Medical Examiner Office in the county where the person died. A fee for copies may be charged.

Resources

The following organizations may provide information, counseling and other services to families and friends who have suffered the loss of a loved one:

AIDS Hotline	800-624-2377
American Cancer Society	800-227-2345
American Heart Association	800-634-1242
Eversight	800-653-9379
NJ Self-Help Clearinghouse	800-367-6274
SIDS Center of NJ	800-545-7437
NJ Organ & Tissue Sharing Network.....	800-742-7365
NJ Funeral Directors Association.....	732-974-9444

Which Medical Examiner Office should I contact?

In New Jersey, each county has a County Medical Examiner Office. For information, contact the Medical Examiner in the county where the person was pronounced dead.

NJ Northern Regional Medical Examiner Office	
Essex/Hudson/Passaic/Somerset Counties	973-648-7259
NJ Southern Regional Medical Examiner Office	
Atlantic/Cape May/Cumberland Counties.....	609-861-3355
Bergen County	201-634-2940
Burlington County	609-702-7030
Camden/Gloucester/Salem Counties.....	856-218-4190
Hunterdon County.....	908-237-6078
Mercer County	609-530-7523
Middlesex/Monmouth County.....	732-745-3190
Morris/Sussex/Warren Counties	973-829-8270
Ocean County	732-341-3424
Union County	908-654-9893

A guide to The New Jersey State Medical Examiner System



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The New Jersey Medical Examiner System

In New Jersey, when a person's death is unexpected and the cause of death is not immediately known, the death is investigated by the Medical Examiner.

The Medical Examiner also investigates deaths that are the result of violence or injury and deaths that occur in legal custody.

What do I do when a family member dies?

Call the local emergency number; the police and emergency personnel will respond. If there is a medical history for chronic disease and there is nothing to suggest any other cause of death, the doctor who was treating the deceased will be contacted. The treating doctor is obligated to issue an appropriate death certificate, and the family can have the body moved to the funeral home of their choice. If a Medical Examiner investigation is warranted, then the body will be taken by the Medical Examiner. Upon conclusion of the Medical Examiner's investigation, the body may be released to the funeral home of the family's choice. The family must notify the funeral home to contact the appropriate Medical Examiner Office.

What happens during an investigation?

The Medical Investigator gathers information from:

- ☞ Family members
- ☞ Witnesses and others
- ☞ Death scene

The Investigator works with police in analyzing the death scene and also obtains pertinent medical records. The facts may allow the Medical Examiner to close the case and refer it to the family physician to sign the death certificate. The circumstances may require that the body be moved to allow a more detailed examination. This may consist of an external examination (viewing) or may involve a complete autopsy.

Why are investigations necessary?

Whenever a death occurs under circumstances that raise a public interest, it needs to be explained, and the cause and manner of death determined.

Autopsies are performed for the following reasons:

- ☞ Public health
- ☞ Public safety
- ☞ Administration of justice

Autopsies identify:

- ☞ Evidence of crime
- ☞ Environmental dangers
- ☞ Work-place and other safety violations
- ☞ Consumer product hazards
- ☞ Public health interests

Unnatural deaths are identified and investigated, leading to proper classification for accidental death benefits. In criminal cases, the investigation provides for proper evidence identification and collection, leading to successful apprehension and criminal prosecution.

What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is an external and internal examination of a body. Licensed physicians, specifically forensic pathologists acting as medical examiners, will perform forensic autopsies to determine cause and manner of death. After examination, the body is closed. Specimens of body fluids and tissues are retained for diagnostic testing and when necessary, organs, such as the brain or heart, may also be retained for further tests.

None of these procedures will prevent the body from being released to the family for funeral arrangements and the autopsy will not interfere with funeral viewing. If organs were held for further testing and should you desire the return of organs after testing, you should advise the office that performed the autopsy of this request. Otherwise, within a reasonable period, the specimens and/or organs will be handled consistent with standard practice.

How long does it take to complete an autopsy? Will it delay funeral arrangements?

A standard forensic autopsy will take about two to three hours. Complicated cases may take longer, but in most cases should not delay usual funeral arrangements. After the autopsy, the body is released to the funeral home. The funeral home prepares the body for viewing.

Will an autopsy interfere with our desire for a viewing or an open casket funeral?

No. An autopsy does not necessarily preclude a viewing. The funeral home can prepare the body for viewing. The surgical incisions which are closed are appropriately covered. However, it may not be possible to restore any post-mortem changes which occur naturally when a person is not found until hours or days after death. Injuries sustained prior to death may make the body non-viewable, and may require a closed casket funeral.

Is an autopsy always necessary?

No. However, in some circumstances, an autopsy is mandated by law. In other circumstances, the medical examiner may determine an autopsy is necessary to identify the cause and manner of death. The law requires an autopsy in deaths:

- ☞ Involving a homicide
- ☞ Occurring under unusual circumstances
- ☞ Posing a threat to public health
- ☞ Involving inmates in prison
- ☞ Where children die unexpectedly

An autopsy enables a Medical Examiner to obtain important evidence about the cause and manner of the person's death that could not be otherwise obtained.

What if the family does not want an autopsy?

The Medical Examiner autopsy, unlike a hospital autopsy, does not require permission from the next of kin. It is done under statutory authority. If the family has a religious objection to the autopsy, the Medical Examiner will make every effort to limit the procedure as far as possible. If the Medical Examiner does determine that a full autopsy is necessary to fulfill public responsibility, the family may present their objection to a court of law for consideration before the autopsy is undertaken.

Does the family pay for any of the medical examiner services?

No. Families pay nothing for Medical Examiner services. The family only pays the funeral home the cost of its services, including transportation of the body from the Medical Examiner's Office to the funeral home.