

Autopsy

What is an autopsy and why is it done?

An autopsy is a surgical procedure that takes place after a person has died. Many people have never thought about whether they would agree to an autopsy for a loved one. An autopsy can help those left behind to understand how and why their loved one died.

An autopsy can help a family:

- Get answers about the cause of death of a loved one.
- Learn about diseases that are inherited. These diseases may affect other members of the family.
- Understand an unexpected death.

Autopsies can help doctors:

- Learn more about diseases.
- Look at the quality and effects of medical care.
- Provide specimens for research which can help future patients.
- Help student doctors learn.

What is learned from doing an autopsy can help to treat and care for other people.

Who has to consent to an autopsy? How soon is consent needed?

- When the medical examiner wants an autopsy for legal reasons, consent is not needed.
- If the medical examiner has not ordered an autopsy, a parent-- or the person legally responsible for making decisions for a patient must give consent for an autopsy. The consent can be for a:
 - Limited autopsy. This looks at only some areas of the body.
 - Complete autopsy. This looks at the whole body.
- Most often a decision about an autopsy needs to be made within a few hours of a loved one's death. More time may be given, if needed.

How is an autopsy done?

There are several parts to an autopsy.

- **External exam.** This may include photos, x-rays, and an exam of the skin.
- **Internal exam.** Surgical cuts are made to examine and weigh the organs. Tissue and bodily fluids may be collected for more testing and/or research.

Who does the autopsy?

The autopsy is done by a doctor called a pathologist. This doctor has special training in the nature and cause of disease.

Will I be told the results?

The healthcare provider who ordered the autopsy will get the results in about 60 days. The results will then be discussed with the family. If there are still questions, the family can meet with the pathologist.

Interpreters or other support staff can be at the meeting with the family and the doctors.

What effect might an autopsy have on the funeral?

- Most often, an autopsy is done within 24 hours of the pathologist receiving the body. This should not delay the funeral.
- Some religions or cultural beliefs call for immediate burial. In that case, we will work with you and the funeral home to return the body as soon as possible.
- No cuts are made to the face or hands, so the autopsy will not keep you from having an open-casket funeral.

How much does it cost?

There is no cost to you or your family.

Will any research be done with the child's body?

Research will only be done with your permission. Tissues, organs, or fluids, such as blood may be collected for research purposes. This helps doctors:

- Learn about diseases.
- Compare tissue affected by disease to healthy, normal tissue.
- Learn about the function and structure of the body.

Where will the tissue/organs be stored?

Keeping extra samples is called specimen or tissue banking. The "bank" is a lab where samples, such as blood or tissue are kept for use in future research studies. Only those with special permission by a research committee can access the tissue bank.

Who else can help with this process?

We know that this is a very hard time for you and your family. If you have questions, please talk with your doctor or advanced practice providers. We also have nurses, social workers, psychologists, chaplains, and pathologists available to you. These people can answer any other questions or concerns that you may have. They are also here to support you during this time.

For more information, or if you have questions please talk to your doctor or call the CHW Autopsy Director at 414-266-2526.