

## What do I do next when a loved one dies?

The first thing you need to do is to take care of yourself. You will need to make several decisions. Here are a few suggestions to help guide you and your loved ones through the process.

- 1) Involve your family, friends and clergy for support and comfort. They will assist you in making sense of this tragic and sometimes sudden news.
- 2) Select a funeral home to help you make funeral arrangements and coordinate final disposition of your loved one's remains. If you don't know where to turn, you can call a variety of funeral homes, ask questions and obtain pricing. Any funeral home can assist with cremation.
- 3) Once you have chosen a funeral home, the funeral director will make arrangements to pick up and transport your loved one's remains back to the funeral home following the autopsy.
- 4) Keep track of all business cards given to you by law enforcement, county coroner, ambulance, and funeral home personnel.
- 5) Start a file or folder to correlate all paperwork and information that will be shared with you as a result of your loved one's death.
- 6) Finally—remember to check in on yourself. Stress can come into one's life quickly and unexpectedly. Don't be afraid to use resources available to you in your community.

We hope the information in this brochure is helpful for you and your family. If we can be of any assistance, please contact us at the phone number on the back of this brochure. The Louisville Office hours are 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Monday through Friday.

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## Kentucky Medical Examiner

### INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES

The death of a loved one can cause tremendous stress and sorrow. We hope this brochure will assist you during the grieving process and help answer questions about the autopsy process and the role of the Medical Examiner.

## What does the Kentucky Medical Examiner do?

The Kentucky Medical Examiner provides death investigation services and forensic autopsy services for deaths that occur in Kentucky when authorized by County Coroners or the Court. All deaths that are sudden or unexpected or occur from other than natural causes must be reported to the County Coroner, who then may authorize a postmortem examination by the Kentucky Medical Examiner's Office.

Our goal is to assist county coroners, families, law enforcement agencies and the legal system by determining a scientifically unbiased and logical cause and manner of death. The information gathered during a forensic death investigation and autopsy can be critical in civil or criminal court cases. Even in straightforward natural deaths, information from the death investigation or autopsy may help surviving family members protect their own health. This brochure will provide answers to guide you when a loved one dies.

## What is a Medical Examiner (and a Medical Examiner Investigation)?

The Kentucky Medical Examiners are licensed physicians trained in the specialty of forensic pathology. The Kentucky Medical Examiner is an independent entity and does not work for the Commonwealth Attorney, Coroner's Office, or any law enforcement agency.

Kentucky Medical Examiners are highly trained, experienced individuals who perform death investigations by documenting and interpreting medical findings, thus ensuring that death investigations are unbiased, thorough and accurate. Kentucky County Coroners and law enforcement investigators may ask you many questions that will help to find answers about how and why your loved one died.



## What is an Autopsy?

An autopsy is an examination of the body to determine the cause and manner of death and assess any abnormalities that may be present. A complete forensic autopsy includes a review of the decedent's medical history. Small specimens (biopsies) of internal organs are microscopically examined, and samples of body fluids are retained and tested for drugs and other substances. In deaths resulting from violence, other types of evidence may be collected and examined by a crime laboratory or other agency.

In some cases, it may be necessary to retain larger portions of tissues, or occasionally even organs, for additional or specialized examination. After such examinations, which may require many weeks, the tissues are routinely cremated. If you want those tissues returned after examination, contact our office in writing within two weeks of the autopsy and arrange for disposition of the tissue through a funeral director. We are open to discussion to try to accommodate your wishes, as long as we can fulfill the legal obligation presented by your loved one's death.

The autopsy and other tests rarely delay the release of the body to next-of-kin. However, final results of the autopsy report usually take 6-8 weeks. In occasional cases, specialized microscopic or laboratory studies may delay the final report longer.

## Will an autopsy always be performed?

No. In many cases of sudden or unexpected death, evidence of preexisting natural disease or other circumstances may make an autopsy unnecessary.

## Can a family refuse an autopsy?

Kentucky law does not recognize a right to refuse an autopsy authorized by the County Coroner. Autopsies are done to answer medical and legal questions in the "public interest," to protect public health or to address a question of law. However, every decedent is treated with utmost respect and dignity throughout the postmortem examination process.

## Who has access to autopsy information and data the Medical Examiner collects?

Basic demographic information and the cause and manner of death are matters of public record under Kentucky law. The rest of the information is treated similarly to a medical record. This information is available to the County Coroner, immediate next-of-kin, law enforcement, legal representatives of the decedent's estate, and treating physicians.

In cases of homicide, Medical Examiner information and autopsy reports are provided to the County Coroner and law enforcement agencies and attorneys investigating the death until the matter has made its way through the courts.

## How do I get a copy of the autopsy report?

Immediate next-of-kin should contact the Coroner in the county where the death occurred for the policy and procedure for release of information to the next-of-kin. Include your full name, address, daytime telephone number and your relationship to the decedent.

Once you have obtained a copy of the report, if the autopsy contains medical language that is confusing to you, you can call the Medical Examiner with questions.

## What if I have questions about the autopsy?

Please call the regional ME office providing service in your area. The four regional offices are:

- 1) Louisville (502)852-5587
- 2) Frankfort (502)564-4545
- 3) Madisonville (270)824-7048
- 4) Fort Thomas (859)572-3559

We will be happy to discuss the contents of the autopsy report with you. If you are unsure which office to contact, call the Louisville OCME at 502-852-5587. **It is our policy not to automatically contact the family with autopsy results, as we recognize some persons do not wish to discuss these matters.**

## What happens to clothing and property?

The Medical Examiner will make careful accounting of all property and clothing brought into the Medical Examiner's Office. These possessions are stored in a secured area. Clothing and property are normally released with the decedent to the funeral home. Personal property is usually received by the County Coroners or is released to the funeral home. Next-of-kin can obtain these items from the funeral director or the County Coroner.

In cases of homicide or undetermined death, the clothing and property may be released to the investigating law enforcement agency.

Firearms are released **only** to the law enforcement agency handling the investigation, and that agency must be contacted for return of the weapon. Prescription medications are turned over to law enforcement for proper disposal.

## How does the Medical Examiner help families and friends?

An autopsy report may help to claim insurance, receive government benefits, settle the decedent's estate, and pursue any civil or criminal legal action.

Medical benefits provided by an autopsy include a medical determination of the cause of death, recognition of unsuspected unnatural causes of death, identification of public health hazards, and sometimes the identification of an undiagnosed hereditary medical condition.

Once the Medical Examiner completes the autopsy, these results are sent to the County Coroner who completes the death certificate.

## How do I get a copy of the death certificate?

The funeral director you have chosen to handle final arrangements for your loved one can assist you in getting copies of the death certificate.

Also, you can obtain certified copies from:  
Department of Vital Statistics \*  
275 E. Main St. 1EA  
Frankfort, KY 40621  
(502) 564-4212

Please note that these requests must be accompanied by a properly completed request (available at <http://chfs.ky.gov/dph/vital/>).

**The Medical Examiner's Office cannot issue copies of death certificates.**