

The role of the Medical Examiner's Office

The Medical Examiner's Office provides death investigative services and forensic autopsy services for deaths that occur in Hennepin, Dakota and Scott counties. All deaths that are sudden or unexpected or occur from other than natural causes must be reported to the medical examiner.

Our goal is to assist 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 subsequent 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.

What is a medical examiner?

The chief medical examiner is a licensed physician, trained in the specialty of forensic pathology. Our office employs several assistant medical examiners, who also are licensed physicians and trained forensic pathologists.

Medical examiner investigators are highly trained, experienced professionals who perform their work by gathering and interpreting information to ensure that death investigations are unbiased, thorough and accurate. Investigators may ask you questions that will help to find answers about how and why your loved one died.

The Medical Examiner's Office is an independent entity and does not work for the county attorney or any law enforcement agency.

When a loved one dies

Here are a few suggestions to help guide you and your loved ones through this difficult 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. Call us — we can point you to resources to guide you through this difficult time.
2. Select a funeral home to help you make funeral arrangements and coordinate final disposition of your loved one's remains. Any funeral home can answer questions, assist with cremation and provide pricing.
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 medical examiner, ambulance and funeral home personnel.
5. Start a file or folder to collect all of the paperwork and information that will be shared with you as a result of your loved one's death.
6. Finally, remember to take care of 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 this information is helpful for you and your family. If we can be of any assistance, please contact us.

612-215-6300 *calls answered 24 hours a day*

Office hours
8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday

www.hennepin.us/me



Hennepin County
Medical Examiner

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Hennepin County Medical Examiner

When a loved one dies

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

The autopsy

An autopsy is an examination of the body to determine the cause of death and assess anything abnormal that may be present. A complete examination includes a review of the person's medical history. Small specimens (biopsies) of internal organs are examined, and samples of body fluids may be 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.

Timing

The autopsy and other tests rarely delay the release of the body to next-of-kin. Every attempt is made to complete autopsy reports within two months. Complex cases involving more specialized testing or laboratory studies may delay the report completion beyond the standard timeframe.

Is an autopsy required?

Not always. In many cases of sudden or unexpected death, evidence of preexisting natural disease will make an autopsy unnecessary.

Benefits of a death investigation

A properly completed death certificate is usually necessary to claim insurance, receive government benefits, settle your loved one'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 determines the cause and manner of death, the state registrar will finalize the death certificate and the funeral home can obtain death certificates for you.

What happens to autopsy materials?

In some cases it may be necessary to retain larger portions of tissues, or occasionally even whole organs, for additional or specialized examination. After such examinations, the tissues are destroyed like surgical specimens in a hospital. If you want those tissues returned after examination, contact our office within two weeks of the autopsy and arrange for return of the tissue through a funeral director.

Religious objections

Most autopsies performed under the Minnesota Medical Examiner Statute (Chapter 390) are ordered by the medical examiner because the circumstances indicate there is a compelling state interest in knowing why someone has died.

Under other circumstances, the medical examiner determines that an autopsy is warranted, but you may feel an autopsy would be contrary to your loved one's religious beliefs. If you have objections to an autopsy, please let the medical examiner know right away.

We are open to discussion to try to accommodate your wishes, as long as we can fulfill the legal obligation of our office.

Autopsy results and information

While we do not automatically contact the family with autopsy results, families and next-of-kin can call us at 612-215-6300 to discuss the autopsy results, even if you have not ordered a copy of the autopsy report.

How to order an autopsy report

Immediate next-of-kin can download the autopsy report request form at www.hennepin.us/me in the *Families and next of kin* section. There is a charge for this report, and other reports are also available on the website.

If the autopsy or other reports contain medical language that is confusing, you can call our office at 612-215-6300 with questions.

Safeguarding personal effects

The medical examiner investigator will make a careful accounting of all property and clothing brought into the Medical Examiner's Office. These possessions are stored in a secured area and are normally released with the body to the funeral home where next-of-kin can obtain these items from the funeral director.

In cases of homicide or undetermined death, the clothing and property are 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.

Tissue and eye donation

In many circumstances your loved one can donate tissue or eyes even after they have died and even if they did not designate it on their driver's license. If you are interested in donation for your loved one, tell the medical examiner investigator.

Data privacy and release of information

Basic demographic information and the cause and manner of death are matters of public record under Minnesota law. The rest of the information is confidential and treated similarly to a medical record. Information is accessible to the physician who attended the person at the time of death, the legal representative of the decedent's estate and to the decedent's surviving spouse, parents, children, and siblings and their legal representatives.

In cases of homicide, information from our office and autopsy reports can only be provided to law enforcement agencies investigating the death and to the county attorney until the matter has made its way through the courts.

Getting a death certificate

The Medical Examiner's Office cannot issue copies of death certificates. The funeral director you have chosen to handle final arrangements for your loved one can assist you in getting copies. The death certificate will be available after the medical examiner has determined the manner and cause of death and the state registrar has finalized the death certificate.

You also can obtain certified copies from vital records offices in:

Hennepin County: 612-348-8240

Dakota County: 651-438-4313

Scott County: 952-496-8150