

FAQ

What is the difference between a Medical Examiner and a Coroner?

A Medical Examiner is a forensic pathologist (a medical doctor with subspecialty training) with particular expertise in investigating violent, sudden and unexpected, suspicious or unattended deaths. A Coroner is an elected or appointed public officer whose chief duty is to certify the cause of death.

What types of death are investigated by the Medical Examiner?

In general, those deaths suspected to be homicides, suicides, accidents, or sudden unexpected natural deaths are investigated by the Medical Examiner's Office. For Additional information see the [Cook County Medical Examiner's Ordinance](#). (Ord. No. 11-O-30, 2-16-2011; Ord. No. 12-O-18, 3-13-2012; Ord. No. 13-O-45, 9-11-2013; Ord. No. 15-5145, 10-28-15)

Why is the Medical Examiner Office involved?

Under Illinois law, the Medical Examiner is both required and empowered to determine the cause and circumstance of certain deaths. For additional details, see the [Cook County Medical Examiner's Ordinance](#). (Ord. No. 11-O-30, 2-16-2011; Ord. No. 12-O-18, 3-13-2012; Ord. No. 13-O-45, 9-11-2013; Ord. No. 15-5145, 10-28-15)

What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is a thorough examination of the body, inside and out, performed to document or rule out injuries and diseases. The procedure is performed by a medical doctor with special forensic training in recognizing the appearance of injuries and the effects of diseases. An autopsy may take 2-3 hours or longer to perform and is often followed by laboratory tests, some of which can take months to complete.

Will an autopsy always be performed?

No. An autopsy is performed at the medical examiner's discretion based on all of the information available at the time of examination. An autopsy may not be required when the death is known to be the result of natural causes, adequate medical history exists, and there are no signs of foul play. Autopsies are required when there is evidence or reasonable suspicion of foul play. In some accidental or self-inflicted traumatic deaths, the interval between the injury and the death is such that there has been adequate medical documentation of the fatal injuries and other contributing factors, and there are circumstances when an external examination, scene investigation, and medical history allow adequate documentation of the cause and manner of death without an internal examination. We are not required by law to autopsy all non-natural deaths. In some cases, an external examination may be used to confirm the cause and manner of death.

When an autopsy is not desired by the family, we try and are usually able to accommodate their wishes. However, often we cannot, due to our obligation to fulfill our state-mandated function or to meet the needs of law enforcement agencies.

Will I still be able to have an open casket service if an autopsy is performed?

Yes. Autopsies are performed in a professional manner that does not interfere with the viewing of the deceased, provided that the body was in a condition suitable for viewing prior to the autopsy.

Is viewing or visitation allowed while the body is under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner?

No. Viewing or visitation is not allowed while the body is at the Medical Examiner's facility. This activity should take place at the funeral home chosen by the next of kin.

How long will it take before the body is released from the Medical Examiner's jurisdiction?

The decedent's body will be available for release after completion of the examination. Upon receipt of a signed authorization from the legal next of kin, the decedent's body will be released to a licensed funeral home or cremation society designated in the authorization.

If a family does not have funds for burial, what will happen to the body?

After three days the body may be released to the Anatomical Gift Association or it may be embalmed by a mortuary school at our facility. If the body remains at the Medical Examiner's Office for 30 days, the body will be cremated in accordance with the local Ordinance. There is a \$250.00 fee to retrieve cremation remains that may be waived if the next-of-kin can provide proof of indigent status. After one year, the cremated remains will be buried. Bodies released to the AGA will be held by them for 60 days prior to donation for scientific education; please contact the AGA directly at 312-733-5283 if they are in possession of the remains. For additional details see the [Cook County Medical Examiner's Ordinance](#). (Ord. No. 11-O-30, 2-16-2011; Ord. No. 12-O-18, 3-13-2012; Ord. No. 13-O-45, 9-11-2013, Ord. No. 15-5145, 10-28-15)

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

Yes. Once family members have expressed interest, local tissue and organ procurement services work closely with the Medical Examiner to allow such donations whenever possible.

What happens to the decedent's personal effects?

Property will be turned over to the funeral home retained by the legal next of kin to handle the disposition of the decedent. Clothing and some other items may, in some cases, be retained as evidence and not returned to you. Unclaimed property will be held by the Medical Examiner's Office for one year and then subject to sale by auction.

Who contacts the funeral home and when?

The legal next of kin of the decedent selects a funeral home or crematory. They can then advise the funeral home that the body is under the jurisdiction of the Medical Examiner. The funeral director will take care of the remaining details.

How do I obtain a certified copy of the death certificate?

Certified copies of death certificates can be obtained by contacting your funeral home or [Cook County Clerk's Office, Vital Records](#). Some suburban towns have their own registrar. It is advisable to call your funeral home or this office for the registrar that handled a decedent's death certificate.

What does “pending” mean on a death certificate?

After the medical examination is complete, it is sometimes necessary for us to perform further analysis, be it medical or investigative in nature, to determine the exact cause and manner of death. A second death certificate will be issued when the cause of death is finalized.

The death certificate shows the cause of death as “pending”: Can I use this as proof of death?

A “pending” death certificate can be used as proof of death. If one is not immediately available, you may request a Certification of Death letter from our Office.

Some institutions will consider this document sufficient. Some will not accept a Letter of Certification listing a cause of death as pending, and require the actual cause of death.

For information on obtaining a Certification of death letter call 312-666-0500.

Does a decedent’s personal doctor ever sign the death certificate?

Yes. In 2/3 of the deaths occurring in Cook County, the person has died of natural causes and the death certificate is signed by that person’s physician. Sometimes the physician is unsure of what to put on the death certificate if he/she is not physically present at the time of death. Some advice for physicians is available in an article published in [Chicago Medicine in December 2014](#).

When will the Medical Examiner toxicology and autopsy reports be ready and how do I obtain copies?

Copies of the autopsy and toxicology reports will usually be available a 4-6 months after the cause of death is determined and a death certificate is filed. If you desire these reports, please telephone 312-666-0500 or write this office with your request.

How much does it cost for a copy of a report?

These fees are set forth by public law, Public Act 096-1161. Autopsy reports are \$50 each; additional reports specific to that case are \$25 each. For specific fees on your case call 312-997-4425.

Who can I call if I have questions about the Medical Examiner autopsy or toxicology reports I received?

Please call our office at 312-666-0500 if you have any questions. Please have the case number ready (if available) and you will be connected with someone who will help you.

My relative disappeared some time ago. Can I check your records of unidentified bodies to see if there might be a match?

Yes. Unidentified bodies in Cook County are listed on the [Unidentified Persons](#) page of this website. Additionally, our unidentified bodies, as well as those from many other jurisdictions, can be searched on the [National Missing and Unidentified Persons System](#). In some cases we have identified the body and there is no known next of kin. Please search our biweekly updated [Unclaimed Persons](#) page.