

Autopsy examination of a baby

This information sheet is about hospital autopsy examinations in Queensland. It does not cover information about Coroner's autopsies. It includes information you may find upsetting and that is best discussed with your health care provider.

IMPORTANT: This is general information only. Talk to your health care provider about your individual circumstances.

We understand this is a very difficult and sad time for you and your family. This brochure contains important information to be discussed at this time.

What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is an examination of your baby's body after they have died to understand more about why they died. An autopsy can find things which you may not see when looking at your baby.

Why should you consider an autopsy if your baby dies?

The most important reason for an autopsy is to help understand why your baby died. An autopsy may not answer all your questions; however it is strongly advised because it may:

- give information about problems that led to the death of your baby
- give information that may be important for your health or for any future pregnancies
- increase medical knowledge that could help other families

Do you have to say yes to an autopsy?

Unless the autopsy has been ordered by a court a (in very rare circumstances), it is your choice whether your baby has an autopsy or not. While an autopsy is strongly encouraged, your health care provider needs to ask for your consent first. Your health care provider will discuss all your options and give you information about autopsy before you decide.

- be told about the reasons for the autopsy
- know what will be done during the autopsy in as much detail as you want and/or need
- have time to talk to others before making your decision
- know how your baby will look afterwards
- have the chance to ask questions and have your questions answered

How long can you take to decide about an autopsy for your baby?

There is no specific timeframe for making this decision. However, better information is found if the autopsy is done as soon as possible after your baby's death.

Where will the autopsy occur?

Only certain hospitals in Queensland are able to do baby autopsies. Your baby may be taken to a different hospital for the autopsy. You may like to ask your health care provider where the autopsy will be done and how long your baby will be at that hospital. After the autopsy, your baby will be taken back to the hospital where you gave birth or the funeral home.

What happens during an autopsy?

At all times your baby is handled with care and respect.

The procedures carried out during an autopsy will depend on the age of your baby, your medical and pregnancy history, and the circumstances of your baby's death. Different autopsy options will be discussed with you.

The autopsy may be limited to the outside of the body (an 'external examination') or may also include the organs, tissues and body fluids inside the body (an 'internal examination').

What is a full autopsy?

A full autopsy involves both an external and internal examination and provides the most information.

What is a limited autopsy?

A limited autopsy is when only some areas or organs of your baby's body are examined. For example, only the chest area or only the outside of the body is examined. A limited autopsy does not provide as much information as a full autopsy as it is focused only on one or more selected areas.

What procedures are involved in an external examination?

Some or all of these tests may be done:

- blood samples from the umbilical cord and baby
- examination of the placenta and umbilical cord
- X-rays and MRI scans (special imaging scans)
- external photographs

What procedures are involved in an internal examination?

An autopsy is similar to a surgical operation. An internal examination involves opening the baby's body, like at surgery. The skin is closed with either stitches or surgical glue when it is finished. The opening (also called the incision) is usually made from the lowest part of the neck to the pubic bone. There may also be an opening made on the back of the baby's head if the brain is to be examined. The openings are made so that when stitched or glued, the baby's clothing will cover them.

During an internal examination, organs are examined and replaced after tissue samples are taken. These tissue samples are very small, and are examined under a microscope.

Sometimes you are asked if larger portions or whole organs can be taken from your baby's body for examination. Larger portions or whole organs will only be removed if you give consent.

Sometimes it is possible for samples to be taken from inside the body by using a needle instead of making an incision.

Who decides what type of autopsy is done?

Your health care provider may recommend a certain type of autopsy and will speak with you about this. The kind of information you may get from an internal, external, limited or full autopsy will be discussed with you. You are involved in deciding the type of autopsy that will be done.

If you have concerns about the autopsy relating to your religious or cultural beliefs, your health care provider can speak with you about how these will be respected.

How long will the samples be stored?

The tissue samples and organs taken in the autopsy will be stored according to legal requirements. This is usually between 20 and 30 years.

How long will the autopsy take?

The autopsy of your baby's body will usually be done in a day. Your baby will be returned to your birthing hospital or funeral home as soon as the autopsy is completed. Depending on the type of autopsy, it can take longer for all the tests on the samples taken to be finished.

Can you travel with your baby if the autopsy is at another hospital?

Parents are not usually able to travel with their baby to a different hospital for the autopsy. You can make private arrangements to travel to the hospital if you wish. Talk with your health care provider about this.

What costs are involved?

The costs of an autopsy for public patients in Queensland are covered by Queensland Health. If your baby was born in a private hospital, there may be out-of-pocket expenses to pay for an autopsy. Your health care provider can give you more information about costs.

What happens after the autopsy?

After the autopsy, you will be able to see and hold your baby if you would like. Let your health care provider know before the autopsy that you might want to see and hold your baby again.

Your funeral director can assist you and arrange for you to spend time with your baby if you chose to do this.

After the autopsy, there will usually be some changes to how your baby looks. These changes will depend mostly on the length of time since your baby died and what procedures were done. Your baby will also feel very cold.

If your baby had an internal examination, you will notice stitches in the skin of your baby.

Depending on the examinations done and whether organs have been removed (with your prior consent), you may also notice a change in the balance (weight) of your baby's head and body.

When will you know the results of the autopsy?

It may take several months for all necessary laboratory tests to be completed. The results will be sent to your doctor and/or your obstetrician. You will be contacted to make an appointment with your doctor to discuss these results.

Autopsies don't always give all the answers and may not provide closure. However, autopsies can provide important information that may help you with your next pregnancy or other parents in the future.

Comfort, support and information

Your friends, family, doctor and hospital staff can offer you comfort, support and information at this time.

SANDS (13 000 SANDS or 13 000 72637): provides support and information to parents and families who experience miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal and infant death www.sands.org.au

Bears of Hope—Pregnancy & Infant Loss Support (1300 11 HOPE or 1300 11 4673): ongoing comfort, support and counselling to parents and families who have experienced the loss of a baby during pregnancy, birth and infancy. www.bearsofhope.org.au

Heartfelt (1800 583 768): a volunteer organisation of professional photographers who provide photographic memories to families. All services are provided free of charge www.heartfelt.org.au

Lifeline (13 11 40): a national charity providing ANYONE experiencing a personal crisis with access to 24 hour crisis support and suicide prevention services

Red Nose Grief and Loss (1300 308 307): a 24 hour bereavement support and counselling to families who have experienced stillbirth or the sudden and unexpected death of a child, regardless of the cause www.rednosegriefandloss.com.au

Centrelink (Family Assistance Office) (13 61 50): provides financial assistance including maternity allowances and bereavement payments www.humanservices.gov.au

Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages (Queensland) 1300 366 430

The registry records and maintains birth and death registrations in Queensland and issues certificates.

www.qld.gov.au/law/births-deaths-marriages-and-divorces

13HEALTH (13 43 25 84) for health information, advice or referral services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.