

# Autopsy examination of a baby

This information sheet aims to answer some commonly asked questions about autopsy. Informed consent and woman centred care are integral to health care in Queensland. Decisions about your care are always up to you.

**IMPORTANT:** This is general information only. Ask your doctor, midwife or nurse about your own situation.

We understand this is a very difficult and sad time for you and your family. This information sheet contains important information about this difficult time

## What is an autopsy?

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

An autopsy is performed by a pathologist—a doctor who studies and diagnoses diseases by examining organs, tissues, and body fluids.

## 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 performed soon after your baby's death.

## Why would 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; but 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 requested by a coroner or a court (in very rare circumstances for a baby), it is your choice whether your baby has an autopsy or not. While an autopsy is highly encouraged, your healthcare provider needs to ask for your consent first. Your religious and cultural beliefs will be respected, and you will be given time to talk to others before making your decision and a chance to ask questions and have your questions answered.

Your healthcare provider will discuss all your options and offer you information about autopsy before you decide. This will include:

- the reasons for the autopsy
- what will be done during the autopsy, in as much detail as you want and/or need
- know how your baby may look afterwards

## Where will the autopsy occur?

Only certain hospitals in Queensland are able to do an autopsy on a baby. Your baby may be taken to a different hospital for the autopsy. You may like to ask your healthcare provider where the autopsy will be performed 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 that you have chosen.

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

At all times your baby will be treated and handled gently with care and respect. 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 healthcare provider about this.



## What happens during an autopsy?

At all times your baby is treated 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'). If you agree to an autopsy examination of your baby it is important to know that your baby will be returned in a similar condition to when you last saw them.

## 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.

## Who decides what type of autopsy is done?

Your healthcare 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. It is your decision what type of autopsy will be performed.

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

## What procedures are involved in an external examination?

Some or all of these non-invasive 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 an internal examination involves opening the baby's body, like in surgery. The skin is neatly 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. The face, arms and legs are rarely involved in an internal examination.

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 the organs that are removed need longer to be fully examined (e.g. two weeks). You will be given the option to delay cremation or burial of your baby until the examination is complete or proceed with cremation or burial as per your wishes. This is entirely your decision.

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

## How long will the samples be stored?

The tissue samples and organs taken in the autopsy for examination 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 completed 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.

## What costs are involved?

In Queensland, if you are a public patient, the cost of an autopsy is 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 healthcare 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 healthcare 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 any changes to how your baby looks will depend on the length of time since your baby died and what procedures were performed. Your baby will be cared for on a cool mat and will feel cold to touch. If your baby had an internal examination, you may notice stitches or glue on the skin of your baby—your chosen baby clothes will usually cover these.

## 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 healthcare provider. You will be contacted to make an appointment to discuss these results.

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

### 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) provide support and information to parents and families who experience miscarriage, stillbirth, and neonatal and infant death [www.sands.org.au](http://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](http://www.bearsofhope.org.au)

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

**Lifeline** (13 11 14) telephone crisis support service [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

**Red Nose Grief and Loss** (1300 308 307) 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](http://www.rednosegriefandloss.com.au)

**Centrelink (Family Assistance Office)** (13 61 50) provides financial assistance including maternity allowances and bereavement payments [www.humanservices.gov.au](http://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](http://www.qld.gov.au/law/births-deaths-marriages-and-divorces)

**13HEALTH** (13 432584) telephone support providing health information, referral and services [www.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/advice/13health](http://www.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/advice/13health)

**Australian Breastfeeding Association** (1800 686 268) comprehensive advice regarding lactation and milk suppression after your baby dies. [www.breastfeeding.asn.au/resources/lactation-after-your-baby-dies](http://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/resources/lactation-after-your-baby-dies)