

We are sorry for your loss. This is a difficult time to make decisions; please know our healthcare providers, spiritual advisors, Indigenous patient liaisons, and social workers are here to support you. This resource is meant to help answer your questions about autopsy.

What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is a careful examination of your fetus, infant or child's body after death to find out what caused their death.

“When our baby was stillborn, the heartbreak was so overwhelming. We did not expect it at all. I had to know why. It helped to find out, through the autopsy, that many of our daughter's organs were affected. She wouldn't have survived long if she had been born alive. It still hurts, but at least we know what happened.”

How can an autopsy help your family?

1. It may explain how your loved one died:

Answers may be comforting and may help everyone cope.

2. It may answer questions you have in the future:

Finding out more about the cause(s) of your loved one's death may help you understand what happened and why.

“We decided that it [an autopsy] was one way to honour our son's life. We wanted to give him a way to continue helping. When we learn from someone they are considered a wise one for sharing their teachings.”

3. It may explain what happened during your pregnancy:

- Autopsy can determine if your fetus had a hidden birth defect which caused death
- Autopsy can help in finding out if you have a genetic condition and may help you plan for future pregnancies

4. It may help prevent future death, illness and disability

“In our religion it is important for the body to be whole. But we really wanted to help others dealing with this rare heart condition. We decided to go ahead with the autopsy, but we didn't allow them to keep any tissues. Joel was buried according to our traditions and we felt that we helped other families a little bit by allowing the doctors to do an autopsy and take photographs.”

Who consents to an autopsy?

Parents/guardians whose loved one has died provide consent before an autopsy unless the coroner is involved. A coroner is involved when the death is unexpected. Parents/guardians

whose loved one died provide consent before an autopsy. When there are questions about the cause of your loved one's death, a coroner investigation is required. Consent is not required for coroner investigations.

What is a coroner?

Coroners are appointed by the government to review unnatural, unexpected, unexplained, or unattended deaths. The coroner decides if there is need for an autopsy for these cases.

What information will a coroner provide?

A coroner's exam provides answers on the cause of death (that is, natural, accidental, homicide, suicide, undetermined) of your loved one.

How can I get information about a coroner's examination?

The coroner contacts the family, when possible, to discuss the reason for the examination. The exam results may be shared with you only if the coroner gives permission.

Where will the autopsy be done?

Autopsies in British Columbia are done at in a secure location at BC Children's Hospital and BC Women's Hospital + Health Centre in Vancouver. If your loved one died at another hospital in BC, they will be transferred to the Vancouver site for autopsy. If you choose, your loved one can be returned to a hospital for cremation or a funeral home for burial after autopsy.

When will the autopsy be done?

After you sign the consent form, the autopsy is done in 2-3 working days. Autopsies are most helpful when done soon after death. If your child has a fatal (leading to/causing death) illness, you may be asked about an autopsy before they die which gives you more time to think about it. Your decision will not change your child's care.

What kind of autopsy will be done?

You can choose partial or whole autopsy. Your specific wishes will be clearly shown on the consent form.

What happens in an autopsy? (Caution: details below are graphic)

A doctor, called a pathologist, is trained in the nature and cause of disease and is in charge of the autopsy. A specially trained assistant or resident (doctor-in-training) may help. The pathologist checks the outside of your loved one's body and may take photographs and x-rays. They carefully look at internal organs through a surgical cut. Organs, thin tissue samples, and body fluid may be taken for testing. In most cases the cuts are carefully stitched closed.

Will we be able to have an open casket ceremony after autopsy?

"Our tradition is to have the funeral within four days so we can have family and friends come and help us grieve together in ceremony."

Your loved one will be treated with respect and dignity during the autopsy. Face and hands are not involved in the autopsy. Marks from the examination will not be visible when your loved one

is dressed. An open casket for a ceremony and funeral is possible after autopsy if you wish. Sometimes, with injury during pregnancy or an accident, your spiritual advisor or family member may advise you that it's better not to view the body or have an open casket.

Why are some organs kept after the autopsy?

Organs and tissues are sometimes kept so that:

- Detailed organ examinations that take more time can be done
- Health professionals and students can learn more
- Researchers can use samples to find better treatments

Organs and tissue are kept in locked storage and samples or slides may be kept for up to two years. Once testing is complete, organs are respectfully disposed of by the hospital, or you can have them sent to your chosen funeral home for cremation or burial.

When do you get the autopsy results?

Early results may be ready in 30 days. The pathologist's final report is ready in 3-6 months. The final report will be sent to the doctor who cared for your loved one. You can make an appointment to discuss the final report results and you may keep a copy of the final report.

Do I have to say 'yes'?

You do not have to say yes/consent to have an autopsy performed. The decision to have an autopsy is your choice, unless a coroner's exam is required. Your decision is documented on the Autopsy Consent Form and you will indicate that you consent/decline. Your decision will be respected.

"I just couldn't agree to the autopsy. I knew that it could help others, but it was out of the question. Our daughter had been through so much with her cancer treatment. I just wanted her to be left alone in peace. Our whole family needed that too."

How will our cultural and spiritual beliefs be respected?

Sharing your beliefs and practices with healthcare providers, spiritual advisors, patient liaisons, and social workers will help ensure your cultural and spiritual beliefs are considered as part of your decision.

Resources + Support

Your healthcare provider is here to support you. Reach out if you have questions or need more information to help make your decision. Visit bcwomens.ca and search the following terms for more information:

Spiritual Care	Indigenous Patient Liaisons	Reproductive Mental Health
Social Work	Family Support Resource Centre	Recurrent Pregnancy Loss Clinic
Postpartum Mood	After the Loss of your Baby	Lactation After Loss