

Under What Circumstances Will an Autopsy be Performed?

The National Association of Medical Examiners' Forensic Autopsy Performance Standards indicate that a forensic autopsy will be performed when:

- The death is known or suspected to have been caused by apparent criminal violence.
- The death is unexpected and unexplained in an infant or child.
- The death is associated with police action.
- The death is apparently non-natural and in custody of a local, state, or federal institution.
- The death is due to acute workplace injury.
- The death is caused by apparent electrocution.
- The death is by apparent intoxication by alcohol, drugs, or poison, unless a significant interval has passed (while hospitalized), and the medical findings and absence of trauma are well-documented.
- The death is caused by unwitnessed or suspected drowning.
- The body is unidentified and the autopsy may aid in identification.
- The body is skeletonized.
- The body is charred.
- The forensic pathologist deems a forensic autopsy is necessary to determine cause and/or manner of death, or document injuries/disease, or collect evidence.
- The deceased is involved in a motor vehicle incident and an autopsy is necessary to document injuries and/or determine the cause of death.

An autopsy is not generally necessary when the death is known to be the result of known medical conditions/diseases (ie, natural causes), adequate medical history exists, and there are no signs of foul play. In some cases, a detailed external examination may be sufficient to document injuries in cases with no pending legal issues associated. A detailed external examination in lieu of autopsy may also be used to exclude the possibility of injuries in elderly persons who die outside of the care of a physician, with no signs of foul play, and in whom it is unreasonable to perform an autopsy due to age or the objection of the next-of-kin to autopsy.