

On behalf of the St. Louis City Medical Examiner's Office, we offer our deepest sympathy to you and your loved ones during this difficult time.

It is our hope that the information contained in this pamphlet will provide answers to some of the questions and concerns that you may have.

1. Why is the Medical Examiner's Office involved?

Missouri law (RsMo 58.720) requires the Medical Examiner to investigate the circumstances and determine the cause and manner of any death that is:

- Sudden, when a person is in apparent good health
- Not under the care of a physician
- Suspicious, unusual or unexplained
- The result of violence
- Unlawful or due to criminal neglect

A body also may be brought to the Medical Examiner's Office if the identity of the deceased or if the next of kin is unknown. The body is retained by this office for a reasonable period of time until the next of kin can be located, identification established and funeral arrangements made.

2. Why must the body of the deceased person be identified?

Identification is necessary in order to establish that the person reported to the Medical Examiner's Office as having died is, in fact, that person, and to complete the certificate of death.

3. What is the identification procedure?

There are several methods available to us for establishing the identity of a decedent. These include:

- Visual identification
- Fingerprinting
- Dental comparison

- X-Ray comparison
- Mechanical implants or devices
- Anthropology
- DNA analysis

It is not necessary for you to come to the Medical Examiner's Office to identify the deceased. If we decide that visual identification is required, you will be notified by an Investigator from the Medical Examiner's Office.

4. How long is the wait to make an Identification?

Depending on the method used to identify the deceased and the availability of information necessary for establishing identity, the identification process can take hours to weeks (rarely, months). Each case is different but most are done within a few days.

5. What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is a systematic examination of the body of a deceased person by a qualified pathologist. The body is inspected for the presence of disease, medical care and injury; samples of the vital organs and/or body fluids may be taken for microscopic, chemical, or other laboratory tests. Performance of an autopsy does not interfere with having the body viewed at the funeral.

A written report is prepared. The report includes observations made during the postmortem examination as well as other testing (such as microscopic evaluation of tissues, laboratory tests, etc.). The report also contains opinions regarding diagnoses, cause of death and manner of death.

6. Why might an autopsy be performed?

NOTE: Autopsies are not performed on all cases.

Autopsies are routinely performed to determine the cause and manner of death on many cases listed in Section 1. Autopsies are not routinely performed in cases where there is significant information explaining why death occurred, the death appears to be from natural causes and there is no evidence of injury or foul play.

In cases where the cause of death is unclear or if death occurs under unusual circumstances, such as homicide, suicide, or where concerns of foul play are raised, an autopsy can be ordered, by law, by the Medical Examiner.

7. Do I have to give permission for the Medical Examiner to perform an autopsy?

No. Any autopsy performed by the Medical Examiner is performed under the Medical Examiner's legal authority.

If you would like to discuss whether or not the Medical Examiner is going to perform an autopsy or what the extent of the postmortem examination will be, please express your concerns to the medicolegal investigator or contact the Medical Examiner's office immediately.

The forensic pathologist ultimately decides if a postmortem examination will be conducted by the Medical Examiner and also decides on the extent of the examination.

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

Yes. Autopsies are performed with dignity and respect in a professional manner that does not interfere with the viewing. If a person is considered viewable before the autopsy, they should be viewable afterward.

9. How long will it take before my loved one is released from the Medical Examiner's Jurisdiction?

Releasing the body to the family is affected by multiple factors such as the time that the Medical Examiner's Office is notified of the death and accepts jurisdiction, if and when the body is brought to our office, the time when sufficient medical and investigative information is obtained, and when the postmortem examination is completed. In most cases, the body is released within 24-48 hours.

In case of suspicious deaths of deaths that require further investigation or examination, your loved one's remains may be held for additional time but will be released as promptly as possible.

Note: Weekends or holidays may delay release.

10. Is viewing or visitation allowed while the body is under Medical Examiner's jurisdiction?

The Medical Examiner's Office is not designed to accommodate viewing of the body by bereaved relatives. No viewing or visitation is allowed while the body is at the Medical Examiner's Office. Only when we decide that it is necessary for establishing identification is viewing of the remains allowed on a limited basis (Section 3). Arrangements for viewing the body at the funeral facility should be made with your funeral director.

11. Who contacts the Funeral Home?

Once you have selected a funeral home, please let them know that the body is under the Jurisdiction of the St. Louis City Medical Examiner's Office. The funeral home will call the Medical Examiner's Office as soon as possible to inform us of your choice and make arrangements to pick up the body.

12. Where is the deceased's personal property held?

Personal property not retained as evidence will be released to the funeral home. If the death may be a homicide, personal property may be held by the law enforcement jurisdiction handling the law enforcement investigation.

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

The Medical Examiner's Office does not issue copies of the death certificate. As a courtesy to the family, funeral homes may offer to obtain the certificates from the Bureau of Vital Records. Copies can be requested through the funeral home when arrangements are made. Vital Records charges a fee for each copy. Copies also may be obtained directly from them. St. Louis City Vital Records is located in St. Louis City Hall and can be reached at (314) 613-3018.

14. When will the autopsy report be ready and how do I obtain a copy?

The Medical Examiner's Office does not provide written preliminary reports for cases under St. Louis City Medical Examiner Jurisdiction. Preliminary information may be obtained by contacting our office.

Autopsy reports are generally available in about 3 months following the date of death. You can submit your request to the Custodian of Records by mail, phone or email.

St. Louis City Medical Examiner

Custodian of Records

1300 Clark Avenue

St. Louis, MO 63103

(314) 622-4976

mererecords@stlouis-mo.gov

15. Can a Medical Examiner case be an organ or tissue donor?

Yes. The Medical Examiner's Office works closely with organ/tissue procurement agencies to fulfill the next of kin's wishes regarding donation of organs and/or tissues. The Medical Examiner will consider the family's desires, the needs of the procurement agency, and the need to obtain and preserve vital information and evidence in our decision to authorize release of those organs and/or tissues that the next of kin has legally given permission to donate.

16. What should I do now?

A funeral home must be selected as soon as possible to handle funeral arrangements for the deceased. When you contact the funeral director, advise them that the decedent's body is under the jurisdiction of the St. Louis City Medical Examiner's Office. The funeral director will, in turn, contact our office and make the arrangements to pick up your loved one.

You do not need to sign any paperwork at the Medical Examiner's Office. All paperwork for the release of the remains and arrangements will be signed at the funeral home.



Information for Family and Friends

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Chief Medical Examiner

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314-622-4971
314-622-4933 (Fax)

The Medical Examiner's Office has Investigators on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Please call (314) 622-4971 if you have questions or if we can assist you further.

Funeral Directors can contact the morgue directly (314) 622-4977 Monday through Saturday 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM to schedule pick up with our staff.