

Attorney Information

What is the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner? The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) is a medicolegal office charged by Connecticut laws to investigate all human deaths in the following categories: (1) violent deaths, whether apparently homicidal, suicidal, or accidental; (2) sudden or unexpected deaths not caused by readily recognizable disease; (3) deaths under suspicious circumstances; (4) deaths of persons whose bodies are to be cremated; (5) deaths related to disease resulting from employment; (6) deaths related to disease which might constitute a threat to public health. The Chief Medical Examiner provides accurate certification of the cause and manner of death. The Chief Medical Examiner may require autopsies in connection with deaths in the preceding categories when it appears warranted for proper investigation.

Who contacts the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner? All law enforcement officers, state's attorneys, prosecuting attorneys, other officials, physicians, funeral directors, embalmers, and other persons are required to promptly notify the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner of any death coming to their attention which is subject to investigation by the Chief Medical Examiner. In cases of apparent homicide, suicide, or accidental death, the scene of the event shall not be disturbed until authorized by the Chief Medical Examiner.

Who oversees the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner? The Commission on Medicolegal Investigations (COMLI) holds five (5) meetings a year. You can check our website for the meeting dates and times or access the information via the State Agency Public Meeting Calendar at <https://egov.ct.gov/PMC/>.

DEATH INVESTIGATION

What deaths are reportable? The OCME investigates fatalities in the following categories: death due to any form of injury, whether resulting from accident, suicide, or homicide; sudden or unexpected deaths not due to readily recognizable disease; deaths occurring under suspicious circumstances (e.g., child abuse); deaths of any individual whose body is to be disposed of in a manner which will render it unavailable for later examination; deaths at or related to the workplace; deaths due to disease which might constitute a threat to the public health.

What is a Medical Examiner? In Connecticut, a Medical Examiner is a board-certified Forensic Pathologist who investigates and examines persons dying due to a sudden, unexpected, or violent death and then determines the cause and manner of death.

What is a Forensic Pathologist? Forensic Pathology is a subspecialty of pathology which studies disease and injury that is of interest to the law, such as injuries and diseases that cause sudden, unexpected, or violent death. Forensic Pathologists must know about healthy organs and effective treatments to determine how someone died. To become a Forensic Pathologist, a doctor must first become a Pathologist, and then receive specialized training and pass a certification exam. Commonly Forensic Pathologists perform postmortem examinations and autopsies to determine the cause of death of an individual.

What is a "No Case" or Investigator Death Certificate (IDC)? A "No Case" is a death that is reported to the OCME, however does not fall under the jurisdiction of the OCME for further investigation. An IDC is a reportable death and the OCME takes jurisdiction to issue the death certificate without performing an autopsy.

DEATH CERTIFICATE

How do I get a copy of the death certificate? Copies of death certificates must be obtained from the Registrar of Vital Statistics of the town in which the death occurred. The Funeral Director may obtain a copy for you. The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner cannot provide copies of death certificates.

The death certificate is not a complete document until the Funeral Director fills out their section and then files it with the Registrar of Vital Statistics in the town in which the person was pronounced dead (called the town of death). The original document stays in the Registrar's office forever. The Funeral Director usually provides a copy for the family, but anyone may obtain copies directly from the Registrar's office in the town of death. Only the Registrar of Vital statistics may release a copy of the death certificate. In 2021, Connecticut transitioned to an electronic death registration system.

The death certificate is public information. To comply with the law, the OCME will release information regarding cause and manner of death listed on the death certificate to media inquiries.

Why does the death certificate say, "Pending further studies"? In some cases, additional testing (e.g., toxicology testing) or further investigation is required for death certification. In order not to delay funeral arrangements, the OCME will issue a "pending" death certificate. This allows the family to proceed with burial or cremation. The "pending" death certificate is a proof of death and may be used for certain estate determinations, however, some insurance companies may not issue death benefits without a final death certificate. To help expedite the payment of insurance benefits to the family, once the pending death certificate is finalized, the OCME can, at the request of the family, contact the insurance company with the result. The OCME cannot send them a copy of the new death certificate but will disclose the final cause and manner of death. Some insurance companies will accept this in place of the actual death certificate.

What is the difference between cause of death and manner of death? The cause of death is the disease and/or injury responsible for the death. An example would be lung cancer or a stab wound. The manner of death depends upon the circumstances of death and the choices are categorized as homicide, suicide, accidental, natural, therapeutic complication, or undetermined.

Who can provide identification? Identification is necessary to provide proof that the individual brought to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, is in fact the identified person. In most cases, family visual identification is not required to be made on-site at the OCME and can be done at the funeral home or through other methods which do not directly involve the family. The OCME recognizes that it is very difficult for families to come to the office to make identification. When such a procedure is necessary, every effort is made to perform the identification in a way which will place as little burden as possible on the family. The closest next-of-kin is not required to identify the body, instead a friend, co-worker, or more distant relative can do this task if it would contribute to the comfort of the immediate family. Visual identification can be performed through photographic images. If the family has special concerns or requests, please discuss them with the pathologist or investigator on duty, or your funeral director may inquire on your behalf.

Does the OCME charge for its services? There is no charge to families for an autopsy. The OCME charges fees (which go to the State's general fund) for copies of OCME reports, civil testimony, and cremation certificates. The current fees are listed on our website.

What happens to personal property? The personal property of the decedent is inventoried by the OCME and released to the Funeral Director when the body is taken to the funeral home. The OCME documents all items that are with or on the deceased, as well as what was released to the funeral home. In some cases, the hospital or police will secure personal property. If a crime is involved with the individual's death, it may be necessary for the police to take possession of some or all the personal items.

AUTOPSY

What is an autopsy? An autopsy is an examination by a Pathologist after death to determine the cause and manner of death. The body is inspected both externally and internally to document injury or disease. Specimens of vital organs (and rarely entire organs) and body fluids may be taken for toxicology tests or examination under the microscope. These tests do not delay the release of the body to the next of kin. However, the results of such testing may take several weeks to become available, resulting in a "Pending further study" notation on the preliminary death certificate.

An autopsy may resolve important issues relating to the cause and/or manner of death and such issues may become important in the resolution of future litigation, public health concerns, and/or insurance matters. By law, the Medical Examiner decides whether an autopsy is to be done or not.

How do Forensic Pathologists perform autopsies? The autopsy is done under the highest standards of medical professionalism, like what you would expect from an examination in a doctor's office or of surgery in an operating room. It includes two phases, (1) investigation of the history/circumstances and (2) the examination of the body, both externally and internally.

During the external exam, the Pathologist examines the outside of the body as it is received, looking for evidence of injury or disease. Photographs are taken for identification purposes and documentation. During the internal exam, the body is opened with surgical-type incisions and the internal organs (including the brain and heart) are examined. In all autopsies, small samples of each organ are retained and preserved so that the Pathologist can perform later testing if needed. In rare instances, an entire organ, such as a brain or heart may be retained for further diagnostic tests. These diagnostic tests are conducted after the release of the body to the Funeral Director. The autopsy report will state that this has been done. Pathologists also remove samples of blood and other fluids/tissues for further studies such as toxicological testing to look for alcohol, drugs, or poisons. If a drug is suspected to have caused or contributed to death, the death certificate may not be finalized until the toxicology results are completed. This typically takes between 6-8 weeks. During this time, the body may be released to the funeral home with a "pending" death certificate.

On what types of deaths are autopsies performed? Autopsies are performed on all homicide victims and gunshot victims. In addition, the vast majority of pedestrians, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, overdoses, industrial accidents, sudden and otherwise unexplained deaths under the age of 45 and a variety of other types of cases are subject to autopsy examination.

How does the autopsy affect a funeral and burial? The Forensic Pathologists and technicians at the OCME are sensitive to the needs and desires of Funeral Directors and families. For that reason, the staff takes these steps with respect to an autopsied body:

- Incisions are made in a way to allow for an open-casket funeral.
- The amount of tissue preserved and retained is small, usually less than a pound.
- Rarely, an entire organ may be retained for additional studies.
- Pathologists, specialists, and laboratories indicate in their written report when tissue or a whole organ is retained. You may ask the Funeral Director to check on this. After completing the autopsy, any material not retained for future examination is released with the body to the Funeral Director.

What happens to retained materials?

Retained tissue and whole organs are stored in preservative for three years, and then are destroyed in a crematorium dedicated to and designed especially for human tissue. Samples of blood and other fluids are destroyed one year after completion of the toxicology report. Information about retention and disposal is recorded in the toxicology report as well as in the autopsy report.

Sometimes, at the request of lawyers involved in lengthy legal proceedings, tissue is retained for a longer period, and on rare occasions, families have asked that retained tissue be returned to the Funeral Director for burial. The OCME does everything in its power to comply with such requests.

What if I do not want an autopsy done (objection)? OCME Statutes and COMLI define the deaths that fall under OCME jurisdiction, and which require investigation. Next of kin may lodge an objection to autopsy for a variety of reasons (e.g., religious, cultural, and personal beliefs). The OCME will take the objection into consideration, however, the decision to autopsy is at the discretion of the OCME Medical Examiner.

A religious objection may be raised when the decedent observed a religion which holds opposition to autopsy as one of its tenets of faith. Major organized religions which hold this tenet include Judaism, Islam, Jehovah's Witness, Russian Orthodox, Seventh Day Adventist, and Christian Scientists; other religions, "organized" or otherwise, also may hold this tenet. Catholicism and Protestant religions (among others) do not oppose autopsy as a tenet of faith. The OCME is not legally bound to accede to these objections or those that are based on personal or cultural beliefs.

After discussing with the next of kin, efforts are made to comply with religion-based requests to perform special procedures or expedite examination, as long as such requests are not in violation of law and will not adversely affect our ability to perform lawful duties.

It may be necessary to perform a complete autopsy despite objections. In these circumstances, when a religious objection has been raised in a case that the OCME has a clear obligation to perform an autopsy, the OCME, at the request of the family, will refrain from performing the autopsy for 48 hours.

Do I have to pay the Medical Examiner for an autopsy? There is **no charge** for an autopsy. In cases of cremation, there is a \$150.00 cremation fee charged and handled through the Funeral Director. Aside from optional request for reports, (please see Next of Kin link for record request form) there are no other charges to the family for the services of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner.

What if the family has questions about the examination and/or the autopsy report? Advise the family to contact the Chief Medical Examiner's Office at [\(860\) 679-3980](tel:8606793980) and ask for the Pathologist who performed the exam. If they have specific questions or concerns, please bring them to our attention when you feel it is appropriate to do so. The office operates 24 hours a day, every day.

FUNERAL SERVICES

What happens next? The next thing for the family to do is to contact the funeral home of their choice. If they are not sure, they may want to ask a friend or clergy. We do suggest that they take some time to select a funeral director. They will need to meet with the Funeral Director to discuss the final arrangements for their loved one. There are many decisions to be made, so they may want family members, close friends, or clergy to accompany them. Once the arrangements have been decided, the Funeral Director will take care of their loved one.

How do they make arrangements for a deceased to be released from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner? The family should contact the funeral home of their choice. The funeral home will make the arrangements for the removal from the OCME. Typically, the release of remains can be made within a day of the death, however, if necessary, they may stay at the OCME while the final arrangements are being completed.

What if the funeral is being held out of state? Families who wish to have the funeral and burial in another state should contact the funeral home of choice in that state. Most Funeral Directors have professional connections with Funeral Directors in other states. If any out of state Funeral Directors have any questions, they may contact the OCME at [\(860\) 679-3980](tel:8606793980) for assistance.

How is the OCME involved with Cremations? By law, the OCME must inquire into the death of all individuals to be cremated in Connecticut. This may include contacting the family, physician, and/or examining the body. There is a fee involved and the Funeral Director handles this process.

AUTOPSY REPORTS

The autopsy report remains with the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner and is not public information. By law, it can only be obtained from the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner and is available only to specific people or institutions defined by regulations. Such parties include:

- Next of kin (or those with written permission from the next of kin)
- Lawyers working with either side in criminal or civil matters involving the death.
- Physicians who cared for the deceased
- Insurance carriers
- Government agencies or servants who need the report to exercise their lawful duties, such as: federal, state, and municipal police departments; OSHA; Child Protection agencies; regulatory agencies like the Office of the Child Advocate

There are two major exceptions:

1. Autopsy reports are accessible to the public via the Freedom of Information Commission (FOIC) if the person died while in custody of the State (usually at a prison).

2. If an autopsy report is admitted into evidence during a criminal or civil trial, it may be available to the public at large through the court.

Who can obtain copies of these reports? The information placed on a death certificate is a public record by law. This includes the name of the deceased, the cause of death, and the manner of death. The findings in the autopsy report are a medical record.

In accordance with the regulations of the Commission on Medicolegal Investigations, the complete records of all investigations are made available to the family of the deceased, to any federal, state, or municipal governmental agency or public health authority investigating the death; to insurance companies with a legitimate interest in the death; to all parties in civil litigative proceedings, and to treating physicians. In addition, records may be made available to any other individual with the written consent of the family or by court order. Legitimate scientific research organizations may also have access to records provided the identity of the decedents are not published or otherwise made public. Records are not otherwise open to the public.

Who is considered legal next of kin (NOK)? Next of Kin is defined as a legal parent, sibling, spouse, or child that is 18 years of age or older of the decedent.

If by definition, they are not the NOK, please have the legal NOK complete the NOK authorization form or provide the proper assignment paperwork from court.

How does the family get a copy of the autopsy report?

1. Visit our website at <https://CT.GOV/OCME>
2. Click the Next of Kin tab.
3. Next of Kin Records Request Form (fill out form)
4. E-mail to medicalrecords@ocme.org

The families should NOT include payment with their initial request. To expedite their request and provide faster turnaround times, the invoice and reports will be e-mailed, unless otherwise specified. When their request is received, we will send them a written confirmation. When the report is complete, they will be sent an invoice stating the amount due. Reports will be sent within 24 hours of receipt of payment for the required fee.

If they do **not** have access to the website, they can e-mail to medicalrecords@ocme.org or mail their request including the following information:

- Their name, address, telephone number, e-mail address
- Name of deceased and date of death
- ME Case # (if known)
- Their Relationship to deceased.

Mail request to: Office of the Chief Medical Examiner
 11 Shuttle Road
 Farmington, CT. 06032

How much does it cost for a copy of the records? The charge is \$40.00 per case and an additional \$10.00 if you require a certified copy.