

When a loved one dies

The first thing you need to do is take care of yourself. We will share a great deal of information with you and you will need to make several decisions. Here are a few suggestions to help guide you and your loved ones through this process:

- 1) Involve your family, friends and clergy for support and comfort. They will assist you in making sense of this tragic and sometimes sudden news. Call us—we can point you to resources to guide you through this difficult time.
- 2) Select a funeral home to help you make funeral arrangements and coordinate final disposition of your loved one's remains. If you don't know where to turn, you can call a variety of funeral homes, ask questions and obtain pricing. Any funeral home can assist with cremation.
- 3) Once you have chosen a funeral home, the funeral director will make arrangements to pick up and transport your loved one's remains back to the funeral home following the autopsy.
- 4) Keep track of all business cards given to you by law enforcement, county medical examiner, ambulance and funeral home personnel.
- 5) Start a file or folder to correlate all paperwork and information that will be shared with you as a result of your loved one's death.
- 6) Finally—remember to check in on yourself. Stress can come into one's life quickly and unexpectedly. Don't be afraid to use resources available to you in your community.

We hope the information in this brochure is helpful for you and your family. If we can be of any assistance, please contact us at the phone number on the back of this brochure. Our normal business hours are 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday; however, our telephone is answered by Medical Examiner Investigators 24 hours a day.

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Hennepin County
Dakota County
Scott County
Medical Examiner

Information for families

The death of a loved one can cause tremendous stress and sorrow. We hope this brochure will assist you during the grieving process and help answer questions about the autopsy process and the role of the Medical Examiner.



The role of the Medical Examiner

The Medical Examiner provides death investigative services and forensic autopsy services for deaths that occur in Hennepin, Dakota and Scott jurisdictions. All deaths that are sudden or unexpected or occur from other than natural causes must be reported to the Medical Examiner.

Our goal is to assist families, law enforcement agencies and the legal system by determining a scientifically unbiased and logical cause and manner of death. The information gathered during a forensic death investigation and subsequent autopsy can be critical in civil or criminal court cases. Even in straightforward natural deaths, information from the death investigation or autopsy may help surviving family members protect their own health. This brochure will provide answers to guide you when a loved one dies.

Staff and responsibilities

The Medical Examiner is a licensed physician, trained in the specialty of forensic pathology. The Medical Examiner employs several Assistant Medical Examiners, who also are licensed physicians and trained forensic pathologists. The Medical Examiner is an independent entity and does not work for the County Attorney or any law enforcement agency.

Medical Examiner Investigators are highly trained, experienced individuals who perform death investigations by gathering and interpreting information to ensure that death investigations are unbiased, thorough and accurate. Investigators may ask you many questions that will help to find answers about how and why your loved one died.



The autopsy

An autopsy is an examination of the body to determine the cause and manner of death and assess any abnormalities that may be present. A complete forensic autopsy includes a review of the decedent's medical history. Small specimens (biopsies) of internal organs are examined, and samples of body fluids are retained and tested for drugs and other substances. In deaths resulting from violence, other types of evidence may be collected and examined by a crime laboratory or other agency.

In some cases it may be necessary to retain larger portions of tissues, or occasionally even whole organs, for additional or specialized examination. After such examinations, which may require many weeks, the tissues are destroyed like surgical specimens in a hospital. If you want those tissues returned after examination, contact our office in writing within two weeks of the autopsy and arrange for disposition of the tissue through a funeral director.

The autopsy and other tests rarely delay the release of the body to next-of-kin. However, final results of the autopsy report may take many weeks. In occasional cases, specialized microscopic or laboratory studies may delay the final report longer.

Autopsy requirements

In many cases of sudden or unexpected death, evidence of preexisting natural disease will make an autopsy unnecessary.

Religious objections to autopsies

Most autopsies performed under the Minnesota Medical Examiner Statute (Chapter 390) are ordered by the Medical Examiner because the circumstances indicate there is a compelling state interest in knowing why someone has died.

Under other circumstances, the Medical Examiner determines that an autopsy is warranted, but you may feel an autopsy would be contrary to your loved one's religious beliefs. If you have objections to an autopsy, please let the Medical Examiner know right away.

We are open to discussion to try to accommodate your wishes, as long as we can fulfill the legal obligation presented by your loved one's death.

For more information, visit our website: www.hcmeo.us.

Tissue and eye donation

In many circumstances your loved one can donate tissue or eyes even after they have died. They can be a donor even if they did not designate it on their drivers license. If you are interested in donation for your loved one tell the Medical Examiner Investigator.

Data privacy and release of information

Basic demographic information and the cause and manner of death are matters of public record under Minnesota law. The rest of the information is confidential and treated similarly to a medical record. Information is available only to immediate next-of-kin, legal representatives and treating physicians.

In cases of homicide, Medical Examiner information and autopsy reports can **only** be provided to law enforcement agencies investigating the death and to the County Attorney until the matter has made its way through the courts.

Autopsy results and information

Please call us at 612-215-6300. We will be happy to discuss the contents of the autopsy report with you.

It is our policy not to automatically contact the family with autopsy results, as we recognize some persons do not wish to discuss these matters.

Safeguarding personal effects

The Medical Examiner Investigator will make a careful accounting of all property and clothing brought into the Medical Examiner's Office. These possessions are stored in a secured area. Clothing and property are normally released with the decedent to the funeral home, and next-of-kin can obtain these items from the funeral director.

In cases of homicide or undetermined death, the clothing and property are released to the investigating law enforcement agency.

Firearms are released **only** to the law enforcement agency handling the investigation, and that agency must be contacted for return of the weapon.

Order an autopsy report

Immediate next-of-kin should submit a completed form to Hennepin County Medical Examiner, 530 Chicago Avenue, Minneapolis, MN 55415. There is a \$25 charge for this service, so please include a check or money order made out to "Hennepin County Medical Examiner."

If the autopsy contains medical language that is confusing to you, you can call the Medical Examiner with questions, in addition to requesting the autopsy report.

Benefits of a death investigation

A properly completed death certificate is usually necessary to claim insurance, receive government benefits, settle the decedent's estate, and pursue any civil or criminal legal action.

Medical benefits provided by an autopsy include a medical determination of the cause of death, recognition of unsuspected unnatural causes of death, identification of public health hazards, and sometimes the identification of an undiagnosed hereditary medical condition.

Once the Medical Examiner determines the cause and manner of death, the State Registrar will finalize the death certificate and the funeral home can obtain death certificates for you.

Getting a death certificate

The funeral director you have chosen to handle final arrangements for your loved one can assist you in getting copies of the death certificate.

You also can obtain certified copies from Vital Records offices in:

- Hennepin County: 612-348-8240
- Dakota County: 651-438-4313
- Scott County: 952-496-8150

The Medical Examiner's Office cannot issue copies of death certificates.