

We understand the death of a loved one can be a difficult time. It is important to decide whether or not you would like an autopsy after the death happens. The hospital has resources to help you select a funeral home to make final arrangements, if needed. The information below will help to answer some questions regarding the autopsy process.

Please read the full document to learn about consenting for an autopsy, how to make funeral arrangements, and how to obtain autopsy reports.

What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is a medical examination of a person who has died. You may also hear an autopsy called a postmortem examination. **Postmortem** means "after death." **Examination** means "to look at something carefully." **Deceased** or **Decedent** refers to the person who has died. This language may be used throughout the autopsy report.

An autopsy is done to learn:

- Why a person died
- What medical problems they had
- Medical information that may help future patients

An autopsy is done by trained medical doctors, called **Pathologists**. During an autopsy, the Pathologists follow a specific process. One step is to remove and study some of the deceased's organs. This can include the brain, heart, lungs, and other organs. The organs are looked at, and samples are taken to examine under a microscope. Sometimes, a small sample of blood will be taken in case more testing is needed.

Autopsies are done on Monday through Friday, not on holidays or weekends. Autopsies will usually be done on the same day if all paperwork and the deceased arrive in Pathology before noon. Sometimes there might be a delay in doing the autopsy.

What are restrictions?

The healthcare proxy or next of kin may decide to place limits on the examination of certain organs during the autopsy. For example, you can choose not to allow the brain to be examined. Or you may limit the examination to the heart only. These limits are called restrictions. If you want a full autopsy with no restrictions, then the examination may include all of the organs. Open-casket funeral services are possible after a full autopsy that includes a brain exam.

How to request an autopsy?

The healthcare proxy or next of kin (if there is no healthcare proxy) can request an autopsy from any doctor who has cared for the patient. If the death occurred at Brigham and Women's Hospital, let the patient's doctor that know that you would like to request an autopsy. If the death occurred outside of Brigham and Women's Hospital, contact the doctor involved in the patient's care to request an autopsy. Even if the patient wanted an autopsy, the healthcare proxy or next of kin (if there is not healthcare proxy) must request an autopsy after the death has occurred.

What is the difference between a healthcare proxy and next of kin?

A **healthcare proxy** is a person chosen by the patient to make health care decisions if the patient is not able to. A **next of kin** is the patient's closest living blood relative. The deceased's healthcare proxy, or if no healthcare proxy was chosen, then the next of kin has the legal right to request an autopsy.

The court has made a list for the order of next of kin, numbered from 1-10. Start at the top of the list and read down. For example, if a person has a spouse, then the spouse is the next of kin. If the person does not have a spouse, then an adult child is the next of kin.

1. An agent of the decedent including, but not limited to, a health-care agent appointed under a healthcare proxy pursuant to M.G.L. c. 201D, unless the power of attorney for healthcare or other record prohibits the agent from consenting to an autopsy.
2. Spouse
3. Adult child
4. Parent
5. Adult brother or sister
6. Guardian when the person died
7. Grandparent
8. An adult who exhibited special care and concern for the deceased
9. A person who was acting as a guardian of the deceased at the time of death
10. Any other person having the authority to make decisions regarding the deceased

Funeral Arrangements

If the death occurs at Brigham and Women's Hospital, the family should contact their chosen funeral home. The funeral home will:

- Contact the hospital's Admitting Office for you.
- Make plans to transport the deceased after the autopsy is finished.
- Obtain **death certificates** for the family. A death certificate can be amended if the cause of death is different from the autopsy findings. This can be done in the town or city that the person passed away in or where they were a legal resident.

Autopsy Reports

Final autopsy reports are complete in about **30 to 60 days** after the autopsy. Sometimes, it might take longer if there are more questions after the first examination. When this happens, the Pathologists take more samples to evaluate under a microscope.

Pathology does NOT automatically release autopsy reports directly to the healthcare proxy or next of kin. Please follow the steps below for how to request an autopsy report.

- Complete the **Authorization for Release of Protected or Privileged Health Information** form, please visit <https://www.massgeneralbrigham.org/patient-information/request-medical-records.com>
- For help with the form, including what fields are required, please visit <https://www.brighamandwomens.org/pathology/anatomic-pathology/autopsy>
- Sign and date the authorization form
- Submit both the:
 1. Authorization for Release of Protected or Privileged Health Information **AND**
 2. An authorization from the Executor, Executrix, Administrator of the Estate or Personal Representative, along with documentation indicating legal authority. *(These terms refer to an individual who is put in charge of settling the estate of the deceased. Legal authority documentation can be obtained from the Probate and Family court in the county where the deceased lived.)*

**Please do this as soon as possible, even if the autopsy report is not finalized.
The sooner these forms are received by Medical Records, the faster the
autopsy report can be released.**

- If you need assistance from Medical Records, call 617-726-2361
- Mail or fax all of the above documentation to:

*Mass General Brigham Release of Information
121 Inner Belt, Room 240
Somerville, MA 02143-4453*

Phone: 617-726-2361
Fax: 617-726-3661

For more information, including frequently asked questions, please visit <https://www.brighamandwomens.org/pathology/anatomic-pathology/autopsy> or contact the Autopsy Office at 617-732-5500 ext. 33641