

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT AUTOPSIES

What is the purpose of an autopsy?

An autopsy determines the cause, manner and underlying mechanism of death. This procedure also documents all of the significant pathologic conditions present in the body at the time of death.

When is an autopsy required?

Under Georgia law, autopsies are required in deaths occurring:

1. As a result of violence;
2. By suicide or casualty;
3. Suddenly when in apparent good health;
4. When unattended by a physician;
5. In any suspicious or unusual manner, with particular attention to those persons 16 years of age and under;
6. After birth but before seven years of age if the death is unexpected or unexplained;
7. As a result of an execution carried out pursuant to the imposition of the death penalty;
8. An inmate of a state hospital or a state, county, or city penal institution; or
9. After having been admitted to a hospital in an unconscious state and without regaining consciousness within 24 hours of admission.

In Georgia, when an autopsy is not otherwise required, the Medical Examiner decides if an autopsy is needed based on information obtained from the investigation of the death.

Is a complete autopsy always necessary?

No. A complete autopsy may not be performed in cases of natural death in which an adequate medical history exists to document the illness, and in which no indications of foul play exist.

Also, based upon the circumstances of the death and the judgment of the Medical Examiner, an external examination or a limited autopsy examination may be performed.

What information is included in the autopsy report when it is released?

The autopsy report always includes a determination of the cause and manner of death. In the medical profession, there are five manners of death:

- Natural
- Accidental
- Homicide
- Suicide
- Undetermined

It is important to note that the medical term “homicide” is different from the legal definition of “homicide.” “Homicide” in medical terms means that the death is caused by either direct or indirect actions of another person or persons. “Homicide” does NOT mean murder, manslaughter or any negligence has occurred.

Does the Medical Examiner need permission to conduct an autopsy?

According to Georgia law, the Medical Examiner does not need to seek permission from the next-of-kin before an autopsy.

Further, no one can “order” an autopsy except the State Medical Examiner.

Who pays for an autopsy?

The GBI Medical Examiner’s Office receives a state budget to perform autopsy services and no charges are passed on to local agencies, coroners, or family members. But, the coroner having jurisdiction in the death is responsible for transportation of the body to and from the Medical Examiner’s morgue facility.

How long does it take to complete an autopsy and issue the Autopsy Report?

Dissection of a body is usually completed on the same day it is received at the GBI Medical Examiner’s morgue; however, the time of day the body arrives at the morgue and the Medical Examiners’ workload may delay the autopsy until the following day.

After dissection, the body is immediately released to the coroner having jurisdiction in the death.

In the majority of cases, the cause and manner of death are determined immediately upon completion of the autopsy and the Autopsy Report will be issued in approximately four weeks.

Why do some autopsies require longer to complete and a report issued?

Additional scientific testing and/or investigation may be needed to accurately determine cause and manner of death in certain cases. The Autopsy Report cannot be completed and issued until these acts are completed.

Depending upon complexity of the scientific testing or duration of the investigation, six to ten additional weeks may be required to finalize the autopsy and issue a report.