

When Your Baby has Died

- About an Autopsy -



What is an autopsy?

An autopsy is where a specialist doctor (called a pathologist) closely exams your baby's body to find out as much as possible about why your baby died. While it is not always possible to find out what caused a baby to die, when a cause is found, it might make a difference to your care in a future pregnancy.

What if I don't want an autopsy of my baby's body?

If you do not want an autopsy done, in most situations, it will not be done.

There is no right or wrong decision. Some mothers do not want an autopsy because of their personal beliefs, and this is fine. Other mothers want any and all tests done, including an autopsy, so they can try and find out why their babies died.

This may be a difficult decision for you. Sometimes family and friends offer their advice about whether or not you should agree to an autopsy. Remember - the decision is yours.

If you choose to have an autopsy done, we give you a consent form to review. The form has more information about the autopsy. Before agreeing to the autopsy and signing the form, we make sure you have all your concerns answered and are comfortable with going forward with the autopsy.

Where is the autopsy done?

For babies born in Fraser Health, autopsies take place at BC Children's Hospital. This means your baby's body will be taken to that hospital.

When do I need to decide about an autopsy?

We know it can be hard to think about whether or not you want an autopsy right now. However, we do ask as soon as possible. This is because time and room temperature cause changes to the body after death. These changes can make it more difficult to find out information during the autopsy.

It is best to decide in a few hours, an afternoon, or a day. We can keep your baby's body cool in a cuddle cot in your room until you decide.

What happens in an autopsy?

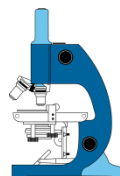
(Warning: These details might be disturbing)

There are two types of autopsies: a 'full autopsy' and a 'limited autopsy'

A 'full autopsy' is when a pathologist examines both the outside and inside of your baby's body. This includes carefully removing, examining, and replacing most of the internal organs.

A 'limited autopsy' is where you decide which parts of the baby's body you agree to be examined by a pathologist. For example, you might only want the chest, abdomen, or head autopsied. Or, you might want to limit the autopsy to certain organs like the heart, lungs, or brain. Compared to a full autopsy, a limited autopsy does not give as much information about how a baby died because all the body's organs work together and affect one another.

With both types of autopsies, the pathologist makes only the cuts in the body necessary for the autopsy. Small samples of tissues and fluids are taken to examine more closely under a microscope.



Most samples are put back in the baby's body. However, some tissue (and sometimes whole organs) could be kept separate from the baby's body. This could be so they can be more thoroughly examined, or for education or research by health professionals.

You can say “Yes” or “No” to allowing tissues to be kept. You can say which organs can be kept separate. Anything kept separately is respectfully disposed of by the hospital. If you prefer, these can be sent to your chosen funeral home for burial or cremation.

No matter which type of autopsy you choose, pathologists treat your baby’s body with care and respect. They only make cuts big enough to allow for the autopsy. Cuts are carefully stitched back together.

What happens after an autopsy?

Tell us which funeral home you wish to use. The director of the funeral home guides you in making plans for your baby’s body after the autopsy. They arrange to collect your baby’s body from BC Children’s Hospital.

When would I find out the results of an autopsy?

The pathologist writes a report about their findings in the autopsy and sends it to the doctor or midwife who cared for you and your baby. The final report can take a few months. To review the results, arrange to see your doctor/midwife.

Even though an autopsy can give more information than other tests, the results do not always explain why a baby died.

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This information does not replace the advice given to you by your healthcare provider.

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