

# What Is an Autopsy?

An autopsy is the examination of the body of a dead person and is performed to determine the cause of death. Forensic autopsies are autopsies with legal implications and are performed to determine if death was an accident, homicide, suicide, or a natural event. The word autopsy is derived from the Greek word *autopsia*: "to see with one's own eyes."

Autopsies are performed by pathologists; medical doctors who have received specialty training in the diagnosis of diseases by the examination of body fluids and tissues.

## Who determines when an autopsy is performed?

A physician cannot order an autopsy on a patient without the consent of the next-of-kin. A medical examiner can order an autopsy without the consent of the next-of-kin if death has occurred under suspicious circumstances. This could include accidental death, or deaths that occur during medical procedures or operations.

A medical examiner is usually a doctor who specializes in forensic medicine, which is the application of medical knowledge in the investigation of crime. Sometimes, medical examiners are also called forensic pathologists. In addition to examining the body, they can also use clues to determine how wounds were inflicted, such as those that occur from knives or bullets.

It takes a minimum of 13 years of education and training after high school to become a forensic pathologist. It also takes a strong stomach because it can be a gruesome, smelly and disgusting job. You may also be required to testify in court over your findings. States or local governments often appoint a forensic pathologist to the job of medical examiner.



## How is an autopsy performed?

- 1) The autopsy begins with a complete external examination. The weight and height of the body are recorded, and identifying marks such as scars and tattoos also are recorded. Any external injuries are documented.
- 2) The internal examination begins with the creation of a Y incision from both shoulders joining over the sternum and continuing down to the pubic bone. The skin and underlying tissues are then separated to expose the rib cage and abdominal cavity. The organs of the thoracic and abdominal cavity are removed for further investigation.
- 3) To remove the brain, an incision is made in the back of the skull from one ear to the other. The scalp is cut and separated from the underlying skull and pulled forward. The top of the skull is removed using a vibrating saw. The entire brain is then gently lifted out of the cranial vault through the top of the skull.
- 4) The organs are first examined by the pathologist to note any changes visible with the naked eye. Examples of diseases that may produce changes readily recognizable in the organs include atherosclerosis and cirrhosis of the liver. Any other traumas are noted, such as a stabbing wound or gunshot wound entry. The pathologist may determine that there are one or multiple causes of death based upon these observations.
- 5) After the organs are removed from the body, they can be further dissected to reveal any abnormalities, such as tumors. Samples of tissue may be viewed under a microscope or sent to a toxicologist for further investigation into cause of death, particularly if it is not evident from the initial observations.
- 6) At the end of an autopsy, the organs are returned to the body and the incisions are sewn closed. In some cases, the organs may be preserved for future study or evidence.

Performance of an autopsy does not interfere with an open casket funeral service, as none of the incisions made in order to accomplish the autopsy are apparent after embalming and dressing of the body by the mortician. This is the origin of the Y incision; the cuts are not seen when decedent is wearing clothes in a casket.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**QUESTIONS:**

1. Complete this sentence to create a summary of the reading passage:

The main idea of this article is to explain:

The main idea is supported by several details like:

2. What does the word “autopsy” mean? What is the main reason for performing an autopsy?

3. What are the duties of a medical examiner?

4. What is a toxicologist? (You may need to google this one.)

5. What is a decedent? What are other terms that are similar to this one that could be used in a medical examiner’s office?

6. What is the Y incision? Why is this the preferred way to perform an autopsy?

7. Consider this quote: “States or local governments often appoint a forensic pathologist to the job of medical examiner.” What is the difference between those two titles?