

Death Investigations in Ontario

An information guide for families and loved ones



Ontario 

Death investigations

The sudden and unexpected death of a family member presents one of life's most difficult challenges. While dealing with grief and loss, people may also have questions regarding next steps.

One of the duties of the Office of the Chief Coroner and the Ontario Forensic Pathology Service is to investigate sudden and unexpected deaths. While undertaking a thorough death investigation, coroners will be sensitive and respectful of diverse cultural perspectives, religious beliefs and philosophical views.

As police are usually among the first responders at a death scene, the Coroners Act states that coroners may request police assistance with investigations.

This brochure provides a brief overview of the death investigation process and is meant for general use only. For a legal description of coroners' duties, inquests and further information, read the Coroners Act online at: www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/90c37

Coroners

Coroners are medical doctors with specialized death investigation training, who have been appointed to investigate sudden deaths as mandated by the Coroners Act.

A coroner is called to investigate deaths that appear to be from unnatural causes or deaths that occur suddenly or unexpectedly. Additionally, a coroner may become involved when concerns are raised regarding the care provided to an individual prior to death.

Pathologists and forensic pathologists

Pathologists are medical doctors who are experts in disease and injury. Forensic pathologists have further training and are experts in disease and injury that result in sudden death. They are the medical doctors who perform autopsies, when required.

What happens during a death investigation

Coroners or forensic pathologists try to understand how and why a person died through a death investigation. A coroner or forensic pathologist must answer five questions when investigating a death:

- who (identity of the deceased)
- when (date of death)
- where (location of death)
- how (medical cause of death)
- by what means (natural causes, accident, homicide, suicide or undetermined)

Information may be collected from several sources including, but not limited to family, co-workers, neighbours, doctors, health records, police and other emergency service workers. Contact with family is vital as they often have important information that can aid the investigation.

Reportable deaths

Under the Coroners Act, certain types of deaths must be reported to a coroner. These reportable deaths include, but are not limited to:

- deaths that occur suddenly and unexpectedly
- deaths at a construction or mining site
- deaths while in police custody or while a person is incarcerated in a correctional facility
- deaths that appear to be the result of an accident, suicide or homicide
- deaths while residing in a long-term care home

A full explanation of reportable deaths can be found in the Coroners Act.

Deaths are generally reported to the coroner by health care workers or the police. However, anyone, including a family member, should immediately contact the police or a coroner when a reportable death occurs.

Impact on funeral or ceremonial planning

Funeral or ceremonial planning may be delayed if an autopsy is needed or if the death investigation takes additional time. Coroners and pathologists are aware that religious, spiritual or cultural practices may dictate time frames for funeral planning and other ceremonies or services. In such cases, families should notify the coroner immediately so that every effort can be made to accommodate these requests.

Transporting the body

In most cases, it is the family that makes arrangements to have the body transported from the place of death to the funeral service provider chosen by the family. In some instances, the coroner will have the body transported to a hospital or forensic pathology unit for further examination, such as an autopsy.

Family Liaison Coordinator

The Family Liaison Coordinator helps families communicate with coroners, forensic pathologists and law enforcement personnel regarding a loved one's death. They also assist families in navigating through the various stages of the death investigation process.

To work with a Family Liaison Coordinator, contact:
OCC.Inquiries@ontario.ca

Questions

We're here to help. If you require additional information, please contact us. If English is not your first language, please ask the coroner if there are services or information available in your language of choice.

Contact

Office of the Chief Coroner & Ontario Forensic Pathology Service

25 Morton Shulman Avenue,
Toronto, ON M3M 0B1
Tel: 1-877-991-9959 (toll free, Ontario only)
or 416-314-4000

Fax: 416-314-4030

Email: **OCC.Inquiries@ontario.ca**

Website: **www.ontario.ca/coroner**

Regional Offices

Central Region

Forensic Services and
Coroners Complex
25 Morton Shulman Avenue
Toronto, Ontario
M3M 0B1
Fax: 647-329-2013

Central East

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Toronto East

(Toronto, east of Yonge St.)
Tel: 647-329-1827
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Eastern Region

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Kingston

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Western Region

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(Brant, Dufferin, Haldimand,
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119 King Street West, Floor 13
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Northern Region

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Sound, Sudbury, Timiskaming)
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Thunder Bay Office

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