



NORTH CAROLINA OFFICE OF THE
CHIEF MEDICAL EXAMINER

Frequently Asked Questions

Phone: 919-743-9000
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What does it mean when the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner accepts jurisdiction?

“Upon the death of any person resulting from violence, poisoning, accident, suicide, or homicide; occurring suddenly when the deceased had been in apparent good health or when unattended by a physician; occurring in a jail, prison, correctional institute, or in police custody; or occurring under any suspicious, unusual or unnatural circumstance, the medical examiner of the county in which the deceased is found shall be notified...”

- NC General Statutes § 130A-383

This means that a medical examiner has been notified to investigate the circumstances surrounding deaths due to unnatural or unexpected apparently natural means. Even though a medical examiner has been notified of a death, this does not mean it falls under medical examiner jurisdiction. During preliminary investigations, a medical examiner may find sufficient evidence that the death does not fall under medical examiner jurisdiction and it is then the responsibility of the primary care physician to sign the death certificate. If jurisdiction is accepted, the medical examiner will perform an examination of the body and make inquiries about the circumstances of the death. In some circumstances, such as when an autopsy is required as part of the death investigation, the decedent may have to be transported to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) in Raleigh for examination.

How are cause and manner of death determined?

A full external and internal examination (autopsy) may be required to determine the cause and manner of death, but in some cases, an external examination may be all that is necessary. The decision to perform an autopsy is determined by the medical examiner and his/her review of medical records, investigative reports, medications, and other information.

How long will an examination take?

Usually, an examination will be done within 1-2 days after the person's death. However, in some instances of suspicious death or identification issues, a decedent may be held at the OCME for a longer period of time. A decedent must be positively identified before he/she leaves the OCME. Under these circumstances, family and friends can assist in this process by contacting investigating officials or our office with medical/dental provider names and records, x-rays, photographs with identifying marks or tattoos, and other useful resources.

As part of the autopsy, the pathologist may take biological samples such as blood, other body fluids, and tissues for further study in an effort to determine the cause and manner of death. Toxicology testing on some of these samples may be performed if the pathologist believes that the results may affect the determination of cause or manner.

All statutes and information regarding the NC Medical Examiner System, as well as document request, can be found at our website:

www.ocme.dhhs.nc.gov

For assistance, you may call the OCME at 919-743-9000
Mon.-Fri. 8am-5pm

(cont.) How long will an examination take?

The sample testing will not delay the release of the body to the next of kin. However, the results of such testing may take several months to finalize, causing the manner and cause of death to be certified as “pending.” If a death certificate is issued with a “pending” manner and cause of death, a supplemental death certificate will be issued once testing is completed.

What should the family expect?

Can family view the body at the OCME?

Viewing is not permitted at the OCME in an effort to protect the public from potential exposure to infectious diseases or other health hazards. There are no facilities to allow viewings; a viewing may be arranged with the funeral service after the body is released from the OCME.

How are funeral arrangements made?

Decedents who are transported to the OCME will usually be ready for release after the medical examiner completes his/her examination. The transporter who brought the body to the OCME may also return it to the county of death for pick up at a local hospital or morgue. Local funeral homes or cremation services designated by the next of kin also have the option of transporting a decedent from the OCME. It is never necessary for family or friends to come to the OCME.

The decedent’s next of kin has priority over making arrangements. Most of the time, family and friends help with these decisions. The next of kin should contact a funeral home or cremation service of their choice to handle the arrangements for their loved one. Once a service is chosen, the funeral home or cremation service should contact the OCME to arrange for body transport. A list of funeral homes can be found at www.funeralhomes.com. A family may also seek advice and recommendations from local churches or friends.

What if the family does not have the resources to pay for funeral arrangements?

If the family does not have the means to make final disposition arrangements, please contact the OCME for further information. The family may declare a decedent “unclaimed.” The state will then take custody of the body and make final arrangements.

How do I obtain reports generated by the OCME?

Death Certificates:

Death certificates are public records. **Copies of death certificates and/or supplemental death certificates are not issued by the OCME and may be obtained from the Register of Deeds Office in the county where the death occurred or the State Vital Records Office.** Anyone can obtain copies of the death certificate from vital records for a fee. Funeral homes can assist you with the process of obtaining copies of the death certificate.

A death certificate is completed by the assigned county medical examiner. For instance, if a person dies in Wake County and the death falls under medical examiner jurisdiction, the Wake County medical examiner assigned to the case is be responsible for the death certificate.

Autopsy, Investigation, and Toxicology Reports:

Autopsy, Investigation, and Toxicology Reports are also public records and once finalized, may be obtained from the OCME. To request any of these documents, please visit www.ocme.dhhs.nc.gov and click on the “Document Request” link on the left side. If you do not have Internet access, you may request documents by calling the OCME during regular business hours. There is no fee for these documents.

What happens to the personal property or medications that are brought with the decedent to the OCME?

Personal property is inventoried by the OCME and given to the transporter when the decedent is released. If a crime is involved, it may be necessary for law enforcement to take possession of some or all of the personal items. Once the investigation is complete, personal effects may be returned to the family at the discretion of the law enforcement agency.

Medications are examined or inventoried at the OCME. Some may be submitted with toxicology samples for testing. All medications are disposed of by the OCME.



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Office of the Chief Medical Examiner
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