

FACTS AND FIGURES:
MA Center for Unexpected
Infant and Child Death

Autopsy/Death Investigation: What to Expect

Scene Investigation

An investigator will collect information including an observation of the scene, photographs, bedding, formula, and medication. They may also ask questions such as "Who last saw the baby alive?" and "What time did the baby fall asleep?"

It is important to keep in mind that the investigator is not trying to place blame. He/she is trying to:

- Rule in/out accidental environmental and unnatural causes of death
- Identify health threats posed by consumer products & other risk factors
- Assist health educators in designing risk reduction

Autopsy

In most cases of sudden and unexpected deaths, an autopsy is required by the law. Although it may be emotionally difficult for family members, an autopsy may be able to provide some answers about what caused the death.

The autopsy will be conducted by a pathologist, who will complete an internal and external examination of the body.



Diagnosis of Exclusion

SIDS is a diagnosis of exclusion, rather than inclusion. This means that after a thorough investigation and autopsy, no identifiable cause of death has been found. It typically takes many months, and sometimes over a year for the scene investigation and autopsy to be complete and for all causes of death to be ruled in/out. Unfortunately, in some cases, answers are never explained.

Who is involved in the process?

Coroner

Appointed or elected public official in your town/city. Responsible for investigating the death and does not need to be a physician. The coroner verifies cause of death and may employ physicians or pathologists to complete the autopsy

Medical Examiner

Physician who is responsible for examining medical history, autopsy and death circumstances.

Pathologist

Physician who is specially trained to diagnosis disease and determine cause of death. Pathologist typically performs autopsy.

Produced by: The Massachusetts Center for Unexpected Infant and Child Death

We support families, communities, and professionals after an unexpected death during pregnancy, infancy, or early childhood. Please visit <http://www.magriefcenter.org>

Information provided by the National Sudden Infant Death Syndrome/Infant Death Resource Center

