



Post-mortem examinations

This information is for people whose baby has died at the Royal Women's Hospital.

We are deeply sorry for your loss. We have prepared this information to support you during this very difficult time.

You are not alone. Support is available to help you through this.

Note: If your baby died at another hospital, you can use the links in this fact sheet to learn about the Victorian Perinatal Autopsy Service. They will give you support and information that is relevant to you.

What is a post-mortem?

A post-mortem is a medical examination to find out why someone died. A post-mortem is sometimes called an autopsy.

A post-mortem is your decision

A doctor will talk with you about the option of a post-mortem and explain what it involves. You can ask questions and share any concerns you may have.

Take time to understand your options before you decide whether to give your consent. Consent means you give us permission to do the post-mortem. You can say yes or no.

There is no right or wrong decision.

What feels right for one person may feel different for another. Your decision may depend on your baby's age, how your baby died, and your values, beliefs, and wishes. Take the time you need to decide what feels right for you and the people close to you.

Why we offer a post-mortem

When a baby dies, we offer a post-mortem examination to help understand what happened.

A specialist doctor called a perinatal pathologist examines your baby. They have specific training and experience in post-mortems of babies. They will treat your baby gently and with respect at all times.

We cannot do a post-mortem at the Women's without your consent. A doctor will talk with you about your options and the consent form. Your decision must be recorded on the hospital consent form, even if you decide not to have a post-mortem.

Sometimes the law requires us to report a death to the coroner. This is not common.

A coroner is an independent legal officer. They investigate some deaths. If the coroner is involved, they arrange the post-mortem. If this happens, we will guide you through the process and answer your questions.

We do a post-mortem as soon as possible after your baby dies. We will make sure you have time to spend with your baby before the post-mortem. Your care team will talk with you about what will happen and answer your questions. They will also let you know if the post-mortem needs to happen quickly.

Types of a post-mortems

Different types of post-mortems provide different information.

All post-mortems include external examinations and tests, such as:

- x-rays or MRI scans, which provide pictures of the inside of your baby's body
- photos of the outside of your baby's body.

Sometimes, even with lots of tests, we can't find a reason why a baby died.

Full post-mortem

A full post-mortem includes an external examination and an internal examination of your baby.

For the internal examination, the doctor removes your baby's organs and brain to examine them. In most cases, they are all returned to your baby's body before the funeral. They will also take small samples of tissue to examine more closely.

Sometimes we need to do tests that take more time. We will talk with you about this. You can tell us if you want to do the tests or not. You might choose to delay the funeral. Or you can choose to bury or cremate the organs later.

After the surgery, your baby will have a scar on the back of their head. They will also have a scar down the front of their body. You won't see the scars when they are dressed.

You can still see and hold your baby after a full post-mortem. You can do this in the hospital, at home or with the funeral director. Your baby might look and feel a little different when you hold them.

A full post-mortem gives us the most detailed information, but it still may not provide a specific cause of death.

A full post-mortem might delay your baby's funeral. We will try to do the post-mortem in time for any religious requirements.

Limited post-mortem

A limited post-mortem includes an external examination and an internal examination of only some organs. You decide, with your doctor, which organs we examine. We take small tissue samples to examine more closely.

External post-mortem

An external post-mortem includes only external examinations. We don't do surgery on your baby, and we don't take any tissue samples.

No post-mortem

You can choose not to have a post-mortem.

Benefits of a post-mortem

You may choose a post-mortem to help answer some questions about your baby. A post-mortem might:

- confirm your baby's age and sex
- show what caused your baby's death
- rule out other possible causes
- give an idea of when your baby died
- explain the impact of genetic or physical problems
- show if there are any risks for future pregnancies
- help doctors learn more to support parents and babies in the future.

Things to consider

A post-mortem may not answer every question. It's important to know:

- it may not find a clear cause of death
- it may delay funeral arrangements, especially if organs and tissue are being tested - you can choose whether to have these tests, delay the funeral, or bury or cremate the organs or tissue later
- your baby will have a scar after an internal examination, but you won't see them when your baby is dressed
- your baby's body might feel different after a full post-mortem.

Storage of tissue

When we do an internal examination, we take small tissue samples for testing. This helps us learn more about your baby's death.

We are required by Victorian law to keep these samples for 25 years. This is so we can explore any future questions about your baby's death.

If you agree to a full post-mortem, we can also keep the tissue samples for research. These are only used with special ethics approval from the hospital. Research helps us learn how to improve outcomes for babies in the future.

After the post-mortem

After the post-mortem, you can still see and hold your baby. You can do this at the hospital or later with the funeral director.

A bereavement worker will stay in contact with you. They will help guide you through the next steps and support you as you make plans for your baby.

The perinatal pathologist will write a report about the post-mortem. This report is usually ready in 8 to 12 weeks.

If your baby was born at the Women's or cared for in the Newborn Intensive Care Unit, you will be offered a follow-up appointment. At this appointment, you can talk with a senior doctor (an obstetrician or paediatrician) about the results.

You can also ask us to send the report to your own obstetrician or general practitioner.

For more information

Contact the Women's Perinatal Loss Coordinator.

Call the hospital switchboard on 03 8345 2000.

Victorian Perinatal Autopsy Service

thewomens.org.au/health-professionals/support-services-professionals/victorian-perinatal-autopsy-service

Tel: 1800 841 024

Email: VPAS.referrals@thewomens.org.au

Do you need an interpreter?



You can ask for an interpreter if you need one.

Family Violence Support

1800 Respect National Helpline

You can get help if you have experienced sexual assault, domestic or family violence and abuse.

You can call any time of day or night.

1800 737 732

1800respect.org.au