

When someone dies suddenly

The first stages

When someone you know dies suddenly, it can be an emotional and challenging time – even more so when the circumstances are complicated, or the cause of death isn't clear. We extend our deepest sympathies to you and your family and whānau.

We hope the following information will answer the questions you have as the coroner begins to investigate how your loved one died.

Scan the code to view a short video about the first stages of the coronial process.
coronialservices.justice.govt.nz/the-family-rights/first-stages-of-the-coronial-process



Your loved one's death has been referred to the coroner

When a death is sudden, unexplained, violent, appears to be self-inflicted, medically unexpected or happens in official custody or care, it will be referred to the coroner.

WHAT DOES A CORONER DO?

A coroner is like a judge. They are independent judicial officers who investigate and make decisions about sudden and unexpected deaths in Aotearoa New Zealand.

At the end of their investigation, the coroner will issue findings on the person's death. A finding is an official record of the coroner's decision about the causes and circumstances of a death.

The coroner can also make comments and recommendations aimed at preventing similar deaths in the future.

Coroners are supported by the staff of the Coronial Services Unit, which is part of Te Tāhū o te Ture – Ministry of Justice.

WHO AM I GOING TO HEAR FROM?

Representatives from both Coronial Services and the Police will be contacting you over the next few days. They need to speak with you as part of the process of finding answers for you and your family and whānau.

When a death is referred to the coroner, the Police are required by New Zealand law to do certain things and gather certain information. As part of this process, it's likely that someone from the Police will have given you this information to read.

The **National Initial Investigation Office (NIIO)** is part of Coronial Services and works on behalf of the coroner. Someone from NIIO will be in touch with you about some important next steps. Occasionally, the coroner will contact you directly if they need to.

Please be assured that the people who contact you will treat you and your family and whānau with the greatest respect during this process.

The coroner will consider your cultural and spiritual needs

It's important to the coroner that they understand your cultural and spiritual needs during this time. Please call NIIO to let them know how your cultural and spiritual needs can be met.

It's important that NIIO and the coroner have the correct contact person, or next-of-kin, to communicate with throughout this process. If you're not the right person to represent the immediate family, please tell NIIO who this should be.

You can phone NIIO on 0800 266 800 or email niiio@justice.govt.nz. Please note that if your loved one has died in a suspected homicide then the Police, not NIIO, will contact you.

You can have an advocate (support person), kaumātua, church minister or spiritual advisor present with you at any stage of the coronial process.

The coroner may order a post-mortem

In a full post-mortem examination, a pathologist (a specially trained doctor) will try to find the medical cause of death by thoroughly examining the person, both internally and externally. Sometimes a coroner may direct a pathologist to only examine the person externally, or only certain parts of the body. This is called a "lesser post-mortem".

A post-mortem examination is usually carried out at a mortuary at the nearest hospital to where the death occurred by a pathologist who is qualified to do so. If your loved one is a newborn child or has died in circumstances that are suspicious, or may involve a crime, a pathologist with additional specialist training may be needed.

If there's no hospital mortuary or appropriate suitable pathologist in your local area, your loved one may be held at a funeral home or local hospital before being moved to the closest mortuary or facility for a post-mortem examination.

The pathologist will do the post-mortem examination as soon as they are able. Usually it's the next working day after your loved one has died. The coroner, pathologist and the Police will do their best to ensure your loved one is returned to you with as little delay as possible.

WHAT IF I DON'T WANT THERE TO BE A POST-MORTEM?

Immediate family have the right to object to a post-mortem examination, except if a person's death appears to be the result of a crime, or where the coroner directs an immediate post-mortem because there is good reason to do so, such as where delay might affect the pathologist's ability to determine the cause of death. Please advise NIIO if you want to object to a post-mortem.

The final decision whether to direct a post-mortem examination or not will be made by the coroner, taking into account all the information they have available, including any objections. They may decide to:

- uphold (agree with) your objection, meaning there will be no post-mortem
- order a lesser post-mortem
- order a full post-mortem
- order an immediate post-mortem to ensure your loved one is returned to their family and whānau as quickly as possible.

If you're unhappy with the coroner's decision, you may object to the High Court. **This must be done within 48 hours of receiving the coroner's decision to go ahead with the post-mortem.**

We recommend you seek your own legal advice about how to object to the High Court. Please advise NIIO if you choose to object to the High Court.

What happens during a post-mortem?

If there's a post-mortem examination, the pathologist will examine the body externally and internally – depending on what the coroner has directed – and will probably take some samples for further testing. This test can provide valuable information about why the person died. Samples might be small pieces of an organ or blood. Most samples are no bigger than an adult's thumbnail.

If samples were taken for testing, you can ask us to return them to you when the coroner's inquiry is closed. Coronial Services will contact you about this. Please note that it could be months or even several years before the samples can be returned, and sometimes there is no sample left after testing.

Immediately following the post-mortem examination, the pathologist will give the coroner an interim (early, provisional) result stating the unconfirmed cause of death. NIIO will inform you of that early post-mortem result. Please see below under 'Next Steps' for how to receive the final post-mortem report, which reports the pathologist's confirmed view of the causes of death.

Being with your loved one

You can view or be near your loved one at the mortuary or local facility, if the facility can accommodate the viewing and the coroner agrees. However, there are likely to be some restrictions on time allowed, such as if other families and whānau are also viewing their loved ones.

The NIIO team will do what it can to help you view your loved one at a time that suits you, or to arrange for you to remain near your loved one. Please call NIIO on 0800 266 800 if you want to view your loved one and/or remain near them while they are in the coroner's care.

It's best if you can arrange for your family and whānau members to attend together.

RECEIVING YOUR LOVED ONE AND ARRANGING THEIR FUNERAL

Once your loved one is ready to be released from the mortuary or returned to the local facility, you'll need to arrange for a funeral director to collect them on your behalf. You may also arrange to collect your loved one yourself. If you wish to do this, please speak with NIIO about restrictions on transporting deceased persons.

If you wish to use a funeral director to collect your loved one and take care of matters, we recommend contacting them as early as possible. They understand the coronial process and will contact us to inform they're acting on your behalf. This will prevent unnecessary delays in collecting your loved one once the coroner has authorised their release.

Your funeral director will receive a release form and cremation certificate from the coroner to allow for burial/cremation to take place and help you to arrange a death certificate.

Next steps

A coroner will now begin investigating the causes and circumstances of your loved one's death. The case manager who works with the assigned coroner will be your point of contact, and will contact you via email or post. They will give you a copy of the *When Someone Dies Suddenly* booklet, which will provide more information about what to expect in the coming months.

The case manager will also send you, or the appropriate next-of-kin, more information about the coronial process. If needed, you can ask the case manager for a coroner's interim certificate to help you organise the deceased's affairs and estate while you await the final death certificate.

HOW LONG WILL THE CORONER'S INVESTIGATION TAKE?

The coroner's investigation can take up to several years to complete, if an inquiry is opened. This means you may not have the confirmed cause of death for some time. The case manager will be able to explain this process in more detail.

The case manager will be available as an ongoing contact until the inquiry is complete, however long that process takes.

Support available

ACC provides financial support if a family or whānau member has died from an accident. Freephone: **0800 101 996**. Website: acc.co.nz/im-injured/financial-support/financial-support-after-death

After a Suicide provides an online support service run by the Mental Health Foundation for families and whānau affected by suicide. Website: aftersuicide.nz

Births, Deaths and Marriages (BDM) provide death certificates. Freephone: **0800 22 52 52**. Email: bdm.nz@dia.govt.nz Website: govt.nz/organisations/births-deaths-and-marriages/

Community Law Centres provide free legal advice for those who need it. Website: communitylaw.org.nz

Sands provides support for bereaved parents after a stillbirth or newborn death. Website: sands.org.nz

SIDS and Kids NZ provides 24-hour support for families and whānau after a child dies unexpectedly. Freephone: **0800 164 455**. Website: sidsandkids.org.nz

Te Hokinga ā Wairua – End of Life Service for all government-published information about end of life. Website: endoflife.services.govt.nz

Manaaki Tāngata – Victim Support provides 24-hour practical and emotional support for victims of crime and trauma. Freephone: **0800 842 846**. Website: victimsupport.org.nz

Whetūrangitia provides support for bereaved parents and whānau after the death of a child. Website: wheturangitia.services.govt.nz/infant-or-child-death

Te Hiranga Tangata – Work and Income where you can apply for a grant to help with funeral or tangi costs (income tested). Freephone: **0800 559 009**. Website: workandincome.govt.nz/eligibility/urgent-costs/bereavement