

When to call the medical examiner or coroner

- **Death due to violence, suicide, or accidental injuries**

Complications of a suicidal, accidental, or homicidal injury may lead to death days, months, years, or decades later...

Death due to subdural hematoma due to fall should be referred to the ME/Coroner

- **Death due to apparent overdose**
- **Any suspicious/unusual circumstance, with particular attention to those persons 16 years of age and under**
- **Sudden death, when in apparent good health, or when unattended by a physician or advanced practice provider**
- **After admission to a hospital in an unconscious state and without regaining consciousness over a period of less than 24 hours**
- **In custody deaths including: Executions; Inmates; Any death with law enforcement involvement**
- **A woman who is pregnant or pregnant within 365 days of death**

- **Pediatric deaths:**

After birth, but before 7 years of age if the death is unexpected or unexplained.

COMMON CAUSES OF NATURAL DEATH

Metastatic lung cancer, Complications of colon cancer, Metastatic carcinoma of the breast

(Probable) hypertensive and atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease

Hypertension, Hypertensive cardiovascular disease, or Probable hypertension

Atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease or Probable atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease

Probable myocardial infarction due to Atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease of the coronary arteries

Pulmonary thromboemboli due to Probable deep vein thrombi

Complications of dementia; Alzheimer's disease

Complications of cerebrovascular disease

Complications of multiple sclerosis

Pontine hemorrhage due to Hypertension, Hypertensive intracerebral hemorrhage; Ischemic stroke

Subarachnoid hemorrhage due to Probable ruptured saccular (berry) aneurysm

Diabetic ketoacidosis, Complications of diabetes mellitus

Complications of chronic kidney disease

Cirrhosis due to Hepatitis C infection; Complications of Hepatitis C infection

Probable community acquired pneumonia

Complications of COVID-19 infection

Complications of alcohol use disorder

Debility and inanition; Senescence

Unspecified natural causes*

* use sparingly

Death Certification Quick Guide



Created with the consensus of
the Georgia Association of
Medical Examiners

Death certificates are considered patient care

Death certificates provide closure for your patients' families

Death certificates are legal documents used for funeral home arrangements, government morbidity and mortality reports, public health disease surveillance, and closure of the decedent's estate.

The death certificate is a living document. If you receive more information, you may change (amend) your opinion.

- Pursuant to Georgia law (O.C.G.A. 31-10-15(c)) it is the responsibility of the clinician overseeing a patient's care to complete the death certificate in cases where the cause of death is related to the natural diseases or illnesses they were managing.

- The law further states that if the provider signs a death certificate in good faith, they are immune from civil liability. This means **you cannot be sued** for your best medical opinion on a death certificate!

- Death certificates should be signed out within 72 hours of the time of death.

A provider that refuses to complete a death certificate when appropriate may be reported to their licensing board for disciplinary action to the Georgia Composite Medical Board for disciplinary action after 30 days by a funeral home.

A clinician can only sign a death certificate with natural manner

- Manner of death (MOD): A classification of death (homicide, suicide, accident, undetermined, or natural)
- Cause of death (COD): The underlying disease or injury that leads to death; use the "but for" model to assess cause of death
- Other significant conditions (OSC): Disease or injury that contributes to death but does not cause death
- Mechanism of death (terminal event such as cardiac arrest, acute respiratory arrest, cardiopulmonary failure, hypoxemia, aspiration): If used, must be followed by an underlying cause.
- **Metabolic and physiologic derangements that occur during all deaths and are not considered cause of death**

Every heart stops beating. Ask yourself, "what is the underlying natural disease process that started the chain of events that led to death?"

A reasonable degree of medical certainty (**at least 51% certainty**) is necessary when issuing a cause of death opinion

Tips and tricks

- It is ok to use "Complications of" underlying disease

*Complications of diabetes mellitus
Complications of clear cell renal cell carcinoma; Complications of alcohol use disorder*

- It is ok to use "Probable", "Suspected", or "Presumed"

Probable hypertension

- Instead of "failure to thrive" consider:

Senescence or old age; Debility and inanition

- Do not use abbreviations

- The death certificate is a legal document, not a note in a patient's chart.

- Time of death may be cardiac death or brain death (review your institutional policies)

- If any external force or entity is related in any way to the death, then the manner is not natural

This includes weather and drug overdoses! Hypothermia, hyperthermia, and acute drug toxicity are not natural deaths.

- It is ok to generalize intervals between the start of underlying disease process and death:

If the COD is Hypertension, the interval is probably years

Seconds, minutes, days, weeks, months, years— all perfectly fine!

Please do not hesitate to contact your local coroner, medical examiner, or Georgia Bureau of Investigation Medical Examiner's Office for assistance with signing death certificates in the state of Georgia.

GBI Medical Examiner's Office (404) 270 - 8210

