



Organ and Tissue Donation Fact Sheet

Death Investigation Facts

Your Family Can Still Participate in the Miracle of Organ & Tissue Donation



Who is Gift of Hope?

Gift of Hope is an Illinois non-profit, charitable organization that provides care and support to families with the loss of a loved one. Our Family Support Services team ensures that your family has an opportunity to create a lasting legacy for your loved one through organ and tissue donation. We are federally designated to serve as the organ procurement organization in your area.

Gift of Hope works closely with Forensic Pathologists to ensure that all relevant forensic information is collected and preserved. We will not recommend organ or tissue donation in any circumstance in which there is a possibility of losing forensic information.

Why is the Coroner's office involved and what does the coroner's office do?

Illinois law requires that the coroner's office investigate any death of a sudden, violent or suspicious nature. Generally speaking, any death that occurs outside of a hospital setting, or within 24 hours of admission to the hospital, requires notification of the coroner's office.

To help determine the manner and cause of death, an investigator from the coroner's office may employ a variety of investigative techniques including interviews with family members and physicians, scene analysis and photography, and physical examination of your loved one. Oftentimes, these aspects of the investigation will provide the information needed to close the death investigation.

My loved one's death is being investigated. Can he or she still be a donor?

YES. Gift of Hope and the Coroners and Forensic Pathologists we work with know how important it is for you to have accurate information about your loved one's death. Fortunately, you do not have to give up the opportunity to participate in organ and tissue donation to have a full and complete death investigation. For many years, Gift of Hope has worked closely with forensic pathologists – the highly trained physicians who perform autopsies during death investigations.

We have working relationships with Forensic Pathologists, Medical Examiner/Coroners and Law Enforcement. We make sure that organ and tissue donation does not interfere with the collection and preservation of forensic information. In fact, organ and tissue donation often provides additional information that is not usually collected during an autopsy.

Will organ or tissue donation make it harder to do a full and complete death investigation?

NO. The Coroner's office will perform and complete a thorough death investigation, and participating in organ or tissue donation does not make that more difficult. The Coroner's office may review medical records, conduct interviews, examine and photograph the scene, to decide if an autopsy is necessary. If the death may be the result of foul play, law enforcement officials will also collect information. Organ and tissue donation does NOT interfere with the activities that the coroner or law enforcement officers need to do.

What is an autopsy and will an autopsy be done?

An autopsy is an examination of your loved one's body that is performed by a specially trained physician called a Forensic Pathologist. During an autopsy, the Forensic Pathologist determines the cause and manner of death and is the expert in collecting and preserving forensic evidence from the body of your loved one.

Each Coroner's office has a forensic pathologist that they work with to decide if an autopsy is necessary. If it does not look like the death was suspicious and the events leading up to the death are known, verified and supported by pre-existing medical conditions, the Coroner's office may say that an autopsy is not required.

What should I do if a law enforcement officer tells me my loved one cannot be a donor?

Under federal laws, hospitals are required to provide families with access to individuals who specialize in organ and tissue donation. These individuals are Gift of Hope team members who work closely with law enforcement officers on how death investigation and donation can coexist.

If you have questions, please contact Gift of Hope at (630) 758-2600. We work with law enforcement officials to ensure you receive accurate, up-to-date information.

I have more questions

Gift of Hope is the federally designated expert in organ and tissue donation. We are available 24 hours per day, seven days per week to assist with your questions. Please feel free to contact us at (630) 758-2600. We also have additional information on our Gift of Hope website www.giftofhope.org.

Will organ or tissue donation make it harder to do a full and complete autopsy?

NO. For many years, Gift of Hope has worked closely with Forensic Pathologists – the highly trained physicians who perform autopsies during death investigations. Working together, we make sure that organ and tissue donation does NOT interfere with the autopsy. In fact, organ and tissue donation often provides additional information that is not usually collected during an autopsy.

Forensic pathologists are usually very familiar with how to support organ and tissue donation and perform a full and complete autopsy. In fact, some states have laws that require the Coroner to make sure that the death investigation is done right and that the forensic pathologist knows how to perform the autopsy correctly for an organ or tissue donor.

Currently, in Illinois, all of our forensic pathologists are familiar with how to perform a full and complete autopsy for an organ or tissue donor. The process involves working closely with Gift of Hope and transplant surgeons to make sure we collect the right information.

Gift of Hope knows how important it is to you to have a full and complete death investigation for your loved one. So, we will work hard to make sure that your loved one's Forensic Pathologist has all the information he or she needs.

One thing that is unique and special about organ donors is that organs are examined by highly trained transplant surgeons. After organs are transplanted, we know the transplanted organs were not the cause of death.