

**OFFICE OF THE CORONER  
MADISON COUNTY  
ILLINOIS**

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***"When Death Occurs....  
Commonly Asked Questions"***



## *When Death Occurs...Commonly Asked Questions*

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***A Message From  
Madison County Coroner  
Stephen P. Nonn, D-ABMDI***



***Truly, the only universal experiences we share are birth and death. With birth, there is joy and elation. In death, there is sorrow and grief.***

***It is my hope that the Madison County Coroner's Office can help you through this trying time and resolve the questions you may have regarding the death of your loved one. This brochure was designed to provide you with a "first step" in managing this difficult period.***

***On behalf of my entire staff, I wish to express our sympathies at your time of loss and encourage you to call upon us if we may help in any way.***

## ***Mission Statement***

*The Madison County Coroner's Office serves as a bridge between the living and the dead. We give voice to the departed and, with all due diligence, endeavor to provide answers to the survivors.*

*Utilizing the resources available by the application of science and under the principles of law, we strive to assure that justice prevails for those deprived of our most precious possession ----  
Life.*

## *When Death Occurs...Commonly Asked Questions*

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### ***Why is the Coroner 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.

The principal responsibility of the Coroner is to assure that a death did not occur as the result of foul play. To help determine the manner and cause of death, the investigator may employ a variety of investigative techniques including interviews with family members and physicians, scene analysis and photography, and physical examination of the decedent. Oftentimes, these aspects of the investigation will provide the information needed to close the death investigation. It is possible that the family physician will be allowed to certify the death certificate.

Sometimes, family members feel as if they are under suspicion or are being asked overly personal questions. The investigation is meant to bring forth enough information to explain why your loved one died. What may seem like very personal or trivial information to you may be a wealth of knowledge for us. Please remember that it is our job to speak for the dead and assure that justice prevails among men and society.

### ***Will there be an autopsy?***

That depends on a number of factors. Age, medical history, and the circumstances surrounding the death are the major considerations. The Coroner's Office may defer an autopsy if enough facts concerning the events leading up to the death are known, verified, and supported by pre-existing medical conditions. Deaths involving the possibility of criminal activity, children, and those in good health prior to death will most likely be autopsied. Likewise, deaths in which the scene investigation suggests an external event (electrocution, drowning, overdose, etc.) will probably undergo autopsy.

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### ***Can I refuse to allow an autopsy?***

We realize that this is a very personal and sensitive matter and some people object to an autopsy. Illinois law REQUIRES the Coroner to perform autopsy examination in certain cases such as child deaths. In other cases, autopsies are necessary for us to perform a competent investigation and Illinois law recognizes that the Coroner must have the authority to order an autopsy despite family objections. If you object to an autopsy for personal or religious reasons, we will discuss the issue and attempt to resolve the matter in a way that will provide you with peace of mind but still allow a thorough inquiry. Regrettably though, there are cases that we feel mandate an autopsy regardless of your wishes.

### ***May I request an autopsy?***

If you have concerns that you feel can only be addressed by autopsy, please tell us as soon as possible. The information may cause us to authorize the procedure. Sometimes, family members desire an autopsy to reveal the presence of any hereditary related diseases or for their own personal knowledge. If this is the case, but the death falls outside our criteria for autopsy examination, we will assist you in securing the services of a pathologist for a private autopsy. In this case, you would be responsible for the costs of the procedure.

### ***What other tests might the Coroner's Office perform?***

We have other scientific tests that we utilize alone or in conjunction with autopsy examination to aid our investigation. It is fairly routine for blood and other body fluids, to be collected and sent for alcohol and drug screening. In fact, State law requires such tests in motor vehicle deaths. Other tests may include blood cultures to determine infections or x-rays to detect the presence of fractures.

### ***Why is establishing positive identification so important?***

In addition to being a tragic and emotional personal event, death is also a profound legal event bringing about the possibilities of court action, the processing of insurance claims, and the settlement of estates. Positive identification of the decedent, accomplished by the examination of circumstantial and scientific evidence, is a necessary prerequisite for the fulfillment of this legal

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event. In cases where the remains are disfigured, decomposed, or burned, advanced identification processes involving fingerprint recovery, DNA analysis, or dental comparison may be necessary to identify the deceased with scientific certainty. These tests may require days or weeks to process and delay final disposition of the decedent. Undoubtedly, this delay is emotionally troubling and difficult to bear, but is absolutely essential to the investigation and subsequent certification of death.

### ***Why was the deceased's medication collected by the investigator?***

This is a routine and standard practice. The medication provides a "quick reference" to the types of diseases the deceased suffered. Additionally, if further blood tests are performed, the laboratory may need the actual medications to help interpret the results. As federal law prohibits possession of medications by anyone other than the person to whom it was prescribed, the medications will not be returned. They will be destroyed at the conclusion of the investigation.

### ***When will personal effects be returned?***

Most often they will be transferred to the authorized next-of-kin immediately. Otherwise, you should receive them after the body is released from the Coroner's Office to the funeral home or after the Coroner's Inquest. If the items become evidence in a criminal case, the State's Attorney's Office will decide when the items may be released to the next-of-kin.

### ***What is a Coroner's Inquest and when is it required?***

A Coroner's Inquest is neither a civil nor a criminal trial proceeding. It is simply an inquiry into the manner and cause of an individual's death and may be convened when the death occurs under violent, traumatic, suspicious or criminal circumstances and in cases of profound public interest. The Coroner also has discretion to administratively review and close death investigations where the investigation has produced sufficient information and evidence to conclude the matter and issue a death certificate with reasonable certainty and without conflict or question.

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An Inquest is conducted by the Coroner or Deputy Coroner/Investigator with a court reporter and six jurors present. The jurors are citizens of Madison County, selected by the jury commission.

The purpose of the inquest is to present pertinent information concerning the victim's death in order for the jury to arrive at a cause and manner of death. The cause of death is often readily apparent and obvious, based on the facts, circumstances, medical evidence and in some cases toxicology and autopsy results. The jury's responsibility is to establish the manner of death – being suicide, homicide, accident, natural, or undetermined.

The Coroner will summon to the inquest those individuals who have pertinent information concerning the incident. This may include the person who found the deceased, witnesses to the incident, law enforcement investigators, or family members. All individuals summoned will present sworn testimony (answer questions) to the jury. Any professional reports (autopsy, toxicology, x-ray, and laboratory reports) will be presented at that time. These reports are not released to the public until the inquest procedures are concluded.

All information and testimony at the inquest is recorded and/or transcribed by a certified court reporter. All such information will be documented verbatim in an inquest transcript available approximately three weeks after the inquest. This transcript – as well as any Coroner's Office records and reports - may be reviewed in the Coroner's Office at no charge. A copy of the transcript is available for a fee as established by Illinois Statute.

When an inquest is required, it is by law, open to the public. Anyone may attend. Currently, one day a month is set aside for the Coroner's Inquest docket. The docket is usually scheduled one to two weeks in advance. Although inquest dates and times are not published, they are available by telephone inquiry. The individual used as the informant for the death certificate (usually the next-of-kin) is notified by mail of the date and time. Attendance by family members is not mandated and is solely a personal choice.

Attorneys are welcome to attend. The need for an attorney is purely an individual decision. This office neither recommends nor advises attorney attendance, the exception being the Madison County State's Attorney, who is notified of all

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inquests in Madison County and may ask questions of witnesses along with the Coroner. No one else, including family, may call or question witnesses. Upon completion of the testimony, the Coroner's jury will deliberate in private. They may request additional testimony, evidence, or conference as they deem necessary. When the jury has concluded their deliberations, they will present their verdict through the foreman.

The coroner's verdict has no civil or criminal trial significance. The verdict and inquest proceedings are merely fact finding in nature and statistical in purpose. However, if a person is implicated as the unlawful slayer of the deceased or accessory thereto, an arrest may be affected. This is extremely rare. This function is now performed by the State's Attorney through grand jury proceedings.

The testimony presented at the inquest is sworn and under oath and properly documented and/or recorded. Because of this, testimony may subsequently be used in perjury proceedings if such testimony should change in future civil or criminal trial proceedings.

In summary, the Inquest is:

1. an informal inquiry or proceeding;
2. conducted by the Coroner or his deputy;
3. a jury of six people, whose purpose is to determine the cause and manner of death;
4. where testimony and evidence are presented;
5. recorded verbatim by a court reporter in a transcript;
6. questioning of witnesses by the coroner, juror or the state's attorney
7. where a verdict holds little significance other than fact finding and statistical purpose, with exceptions;
8. where testimony cannot be changed at a later date;
9. open to the public;
10. establishing cause and manner of death, which will be recorded on the permanent death certificate which can be obtained by the registrar;

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Records are public and accessible after the inquest unless restricted by the State's Attorney or the Circuit Court.

A verdict cannot later be changed or the inquest reopened for any purpose (pursuant to opinions of the Illinois Attorney General).

### ***What else do I need to think about?***

If you have not already done so, you will need to select a funeral home for arrangements after the preliminary investigation and/or autopsy are completed. Also, locating important documents such as insurance policies and veteran's papers may be useful. You will undoubtedly have more questions than this brochure will answer. It's very important to write your questions down for later reference. Coroner's staff will try to answer those questions or refer you to the person or agency that can.

### ***How long will it be before a death certificate is available?***

A death certificate may be available within 48 hours if the deceased has been under a doctor's care. In the event of a complex death investigation requiring a Coroner's Inquest, the process may be delayed several weeks, but a temporary certificate will be issued to allow the funeral to be carried out. We strive to process cases as expeditiously as possible, but a competent death investigation requires time with attention to detail.

### ***Where do I obtain certified copies of the death certificate and other coroner's reports?***

The Coroner's Office DOES NOT maintain the death certificates. This task is performed by the County Registrar designated for the area of the county where the death occurred. The Madison County Clerk in Edwardsville is ultimately responsible for maintaining death certificates for anyone who dies in Madison County.

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Your best course of action is to obtain the certificates through the funeral home that was responsible for arrangements.

Coroner's records and reports will be available after the death certificate is issued. Illinois law requires that fees be charged for the various reports and records requested.

The current fee schedule for copies of coroner's records and reports is:

Coroner's Inquest Transcript.....	\$ 5.00/page
Investigation Reports.....	\$ 25.00 per report
Coroner's Jury Verdict Form.....	\$ 5.00
Autopsy Report.....	\$50.00
Toxicology Report.....	\$25.00
Coroner's Photographs.....	\$ 3.00/print

A written request is required to obtain the documents. For further information or to obtain an order form and the fee schedule, please call the Coroner's Office, Monday - Friday, from 8:30 AM – 4:30 PM.

You may also visit the Madison County Coroner's Office website at [www.co.madison.il.us](http://www.co.madison.il.us) for more information.

*If you have further questions or concerns, please contact your case investigator:*

***Notes Page***

(Questions to ask, important phone numbers, etc.)