

---

## Initial information for families on postmortem examination of their child

---

### **Children's Unit**

### **Patient Information**





## Introduction

This information booklet explains what examination after death (postmortem examination) is, what will happen to your child and which decisions you will need to make.

We understand that this is a very difficult time for you and your family, and it may be hard to make decisions about a postmortem examination for your child. We want any decision you make to be informed. We hope that this information will be useful to refer to after you have had discussions with your child's oncologist.

## What is a postmortem examination?

An examination after death, or **postmortem examination**, is a detailed physical examination of your child after they have died.

## Who can ask for a postmortem examination?

Either the coroner, your medical team, or yourself can ask for a postmortem examination.

The reason why different individuals in different roles may ask for it are different and are explained below.

## How would a postmortem help?

In some cases, though a child has been ill for a while, the cause of death is uncertain or suspicious, and the postmortem will allow us to identify it with confidence. In this situation the coroner will request the postmortem, and your consent will not be needed.

In some cases, even though you and the medical team may know your child's cause of death, a postmortem examination can help us to understand more details about your child's disease. It can also allow research to foster the understanding of the disease in general. Your child's postmortem will contribute to increase the knowledge available, and hopefully it will help future children and families.

If this is the case, your child's oncologist will discuss this with you, explain what is involved and ask you to sign a consent form.

Finally, you may have questions regarding the death of your child, which are important for you to have answered. You can request a postmortem and discuss with the medical team if this can answer your questions, and how.

## Are there different types of postmortem?

There are different types of postmortem examination:

### 1. A coroner's or forensic postmortem

This is only carried out if the cause of death is unknown or thought to be suspicious. This is decided by a coroner and is the only postmortem that is part of a legal process. It is a legal decision made by coroner and does not require your permission.

### 2. Hospital postmortem examination – requires your permission

- a. A complete hospital postmortem
- b. A limited hospital postmortem
- c. A minimally invasive hospital postmortem
- d. A postmortem hospital biopsy.

No type of hospital postmortem examination is a legal requirement, so it will only go ahead with your consent.

The consent form asks your agreement for:

- which type of postmortem examination and
- what samples of tissue or whole organs can be kept for detailed examination.

No samples of tissue or organs will be kept permanently without your explicit, signed consent.

The rest of the information in this booklet describes the process for hospital postmortems.

## What will happen after the postmortem?

The pathologist will make efforts so that no sign of the examination is visible, and they are hidden by clothes and hair. **You will also be able to discuss details, ask questions and express your wishes regarding what could and what shouldn't be visible after the examination.** Your child's skin tone, colour and temperature may have changed, which is normal after death. You will be able to arrange the details (but possibly not the date) of your child's funeral, before the postmortem examination has taken place. The oncology or palliative care team at the Royal Marsden should be able to guide you on timings. If you would like a more detailed discussion about the postmortem examination report when it is available, you can ask for an appointment with your child's oncologist to discuss it.

## Who can I speak to for more information?

You will probably have lots of questions. You can talk to a member of your child's oncology or palliative care team. If possible, talk to your partner, family and friends or those supporting you.

If you do not want to know any further, detailed information about your child's postmortem please stop here. If you would like further details, please keep reading.

## Notes and questions

## References

This booklet is evidence based wherever the appropriate evidence is available, and represents an accumulation of expert opinion and professional interpretation.

Details of the references used in writing this booklet are available on request from:

The Royal Marsden Help Centre

Telephone: Chelsea 020 7811 8438 / 020 7808 2083

Sutton 020 8661 3759 / 3951

Email: [patientcentre@rmh.nhs.uk](mailto:patientcentre@rmh.nhs.uk)

No conflicts of interest were declared in the production of this booklet.

Should you require information in an alternative format, please contact The Royal Marsden Help Centre.

The patient information service is generously supported by The Royal Marsden Cancer Charity.

[royalmarsden.org](http://royalmarsden.org)

Registered Charity No.1095197



Published November 2025. Planned review November 2028  
© The Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust CU-1862-01



Radiotherapy and  
Chemotherapy Services  
F538021 & F538022

