



INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES

Having a post mortem after the loss of your baby

Please be aware that the following information may be distressing to some readers.

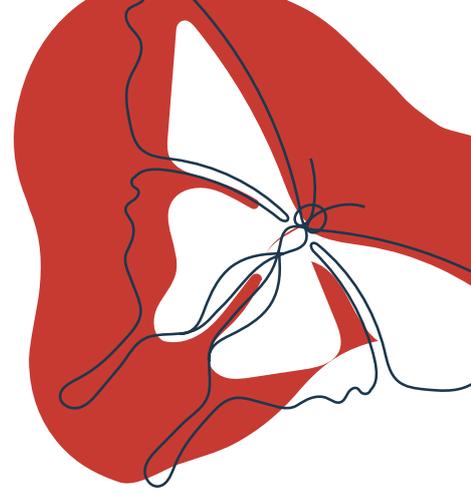
We offer our heartfelt condolences if you, or someone close to you, has suffered the loss of a baby. We understand that the loss of your baby is a painful time, so we're committed to supporting and caring for you and your family as you navigate this difficult experience.

The loss of your baby may raise important questions that can affect your grieving process as well as have implications for future pregnancies. The decision to have an internal examination of your baby's body is a personal one. Research, and our experience in assisting hundreds of families, shows that some parents have later regretted not having the information that a post-mortem examination may provide. Rarely do they regret having this information.

A post-mortem examination is a detailed internal examination of your baby and is usually performed by a pathologist within 48 hours after birth. Some parents understandably find this request overwhelming at such a difficult time. It can be daunting to make the decision to have an autopsy performed as there is some fear about the process, or concern that your baby will be returned to you disfigured.

Please be assured that the examination will not compromise your ongoing contact with your baby, nor any pastoral, spiritual or religious needs related to your family. The post mortem examination will be performed carefully in such a way that you will still be able to hold your baby following the completion of the examination.

Please take your time in reading about the post mortem process in this handout and understanding the options available to you.



Frequently Asked Questions

What is a post mortem examination?

This is an examination performed after death to provide as much information as possible to explain what happened to your baby and why. An examination can only be performed with your consent. The examination is performed by a medical specialist called a Paediatric and Perinatal Pathologist who is experienced and trained specifically in this area.

What choices are available to me?

It's entirely up to you the type of examination you give permission for the pathologist to perform. The examination will be tailored precisely to your wishes. These should be written on the signed consent form so that the pathologist knows exactly what is required, but also what you do not permit.

What are the types of examinations?

Full post mortem examination

This will allow the pathologist to give a very detailed report of any external or internal abnormalities, organ growth and structural defects. To perform the autopsy, incisions will be made in order to examine the organs. These are made along your baby's chest and tummy and another is made at the back of his/her skull. These will be delicately repaired and will not be visible to you when your baby is returned to you carefully redressed and wrapped. The examination will include an x-ray and placental examination.

This will be carefully repaired and will not be visible to you when your baby is returned to you carefully re-dressed and wrapped. The examination will include an x-ray and placental examination.

External post mortem examination

This is where only the outside of your baby's body is examined. No incisions are made and no internal organs are studied. The examination will include an x-ray if required and placental examination.

Limited post mortem examination

This is where restrictions are placed on the examination, such as:

- Examination of the abdominal and chest organs but no head incisions
- Examination of chest organs only
- Examination of abdominal organs only
- Examination of head only.

A more complete examination allows the pathologist to provide a more informative final report. If we're able to provide more information to the doctor or counsellor involved in your care, they will be better able to explain what happened to your baby and whether this could affect future pregnancies or other family members. Your doctor or midwife will be able to give you more information about the post-mortem procedure and answer any questions you have.

To perform a limited autopsy, an incision is made as determined by the Pathologist.



Frequently Asked Questions

What about other tests?

Genetic, microbiology, virology or other laboratory tests may help detect infection or genetic problems. Small specimens will be sent for tests if the pathologist thinks it necessary at the time of the post mortem examination. Genetic testing can only be done with additional specific consent.

The results of these additional tests are included in the final report.

Do you keep the organs?

PathWest has a formal policy that all organs are returned to the body and whole organs are never kept without the specific consent of the parents. Please be aware that some organs, such as the brain, cannot be examined satisfactorily without chemical treatment (this is called 'fixation').

Without this examination, the amount of information will be reduced so you may be asked before the examination for permission to allow us to keep the organ for a little longer.

If permission has been granted and an organ has been retained for fixation, the options include:

1. Delay cremation or burial until examination is complete (this may take up to two weeks)
2. Proceed with cremation or burial and have a separate interment later.

This is entirely up to you to decide. Your post mortem coordinator or doctor will be able to offer advice and support.

What does the post mortem examination report contain?

Following the post mortem examination, the pathologist writes a report for the doctor who cared for you and your baby, detailing their findings.

A provisional report will generally be available within 2-3 working days and a final report will be issued within 6-8 weeks, when all test results are known.

The information gained from this report will allow your healthcare professional to counsel you if your baby had a genetic condition or discuss why your baby died and what the risks are for future pregnancies. We can also prepare a report for you in non-technical language for discussion with your healthcare professional. This report, called the Plain Language Report, can be requested when signing the post mortem examination consent form.

Who can I speak to for advice?

The post mortem coordinator or your doctor will be able to discuss all your questions about the post mortem examination with you.

Do I have to make any decisions right now?

No, you don't. It's important to reach decisions you are comfortable with and we understand that this may take some time. No examination of your baby will be performed without your consent.



Frequently Asked Questions

Where does the examination take place and what actually happens during the examination?

The post mortem examination takes place at PathWest's Paediatric & Perinatal Pathology department at Perth Children's Hospital (PCH).

Your baby is kept in Perinatal Pathology at King Edward Memorial Hospital (KEMH). If your baby requires an examination, he/she will be transferred to the PathWest Paediatric & Perinatal Pathology department at Perth Children's Hospital (PCH). Your baby will always be accompanied by Perinatal Pathology staff. Before leaving KEMH, an x-ray of your baby is done to assess bone development. On arrival at PCH, the pathologist will perform an examination in accordance with the consent you signed. Measurements and photographs are also taken of your baby to create a permanent record. The placenta is also examined at this time, if available. Your baby will be returned to the Perinatal Pathology department at KEMH the same day.

During a post mortem examination, a training doctor, midwife, nurse, laboratory technician or specialist may be present as part of their training or to review the findings. Tissue won't be taken or used for research purposes unless your permission is given on the consent form. Any research that takes place will have the approval of the hospital's ethics committee.

Please be aware that PathWest's Paediatric & Perinatal Pathology department is a teaching government agency where any photographs, diagnostic slides or knowledge gained during a post mortem examination may be used anonymously for teaching of clinicians or authorised students.

How much tissue is taken?

A small biopsy (roughly the size of a pea) is routinely taken from every major organ for microscopy to detect disease, similar to how biopsies are taken during life to determine if disease is present. This tissue is processed into a paraffin block from which a microscope slide is produced. This material is kept indefinitely. Some tissue may be sent to other departments such as microbiology or virology, depending on what the pathologist thinks the underlying disease process is. In most cases, a small pea-sized piece of tissue is frozen in a special way if any further testing (such as genetics) is required in the future. Any genetic testing can only proceed with your permission and a separate consent form will need to be signed by your treating doctor. All remaining tissue is returned to the body at the conclusion of the post-mortem.

How long is tissue kept?

Unless permission is specifically granted, all tissues are returned to the body at the conclusion of the post-mortem. A pea-sized sample is taken from every major organ. From this, a paraffin block and microscope slide is produced for microscopic examination to detect disease with some samples being frozen or sent for testing within other departments (e.g. genetics, microbiology, virology). The paraffin blocks and microscopic slides are kept indefinitely as part of the patient record and can be referred to at a later stage (e.g. if new genetic tests become available). The frozen samples are kept for up to 20 years and may be sent to Diagnostic Genomics for further testing. Genetic testing requires specific permission and will be discussed with you by your treating doctor.



Comfort, support and more information

Information about other services provided by Perinatal Pathology can be accessed on our website, including:

- Creating memories
- Arranging viewings
- Cremation options
- Taking your baby home
- Funerals
- Grief support.

Contact PathWest

Office hours

Monday to Friday 7.30am - 3.30pm

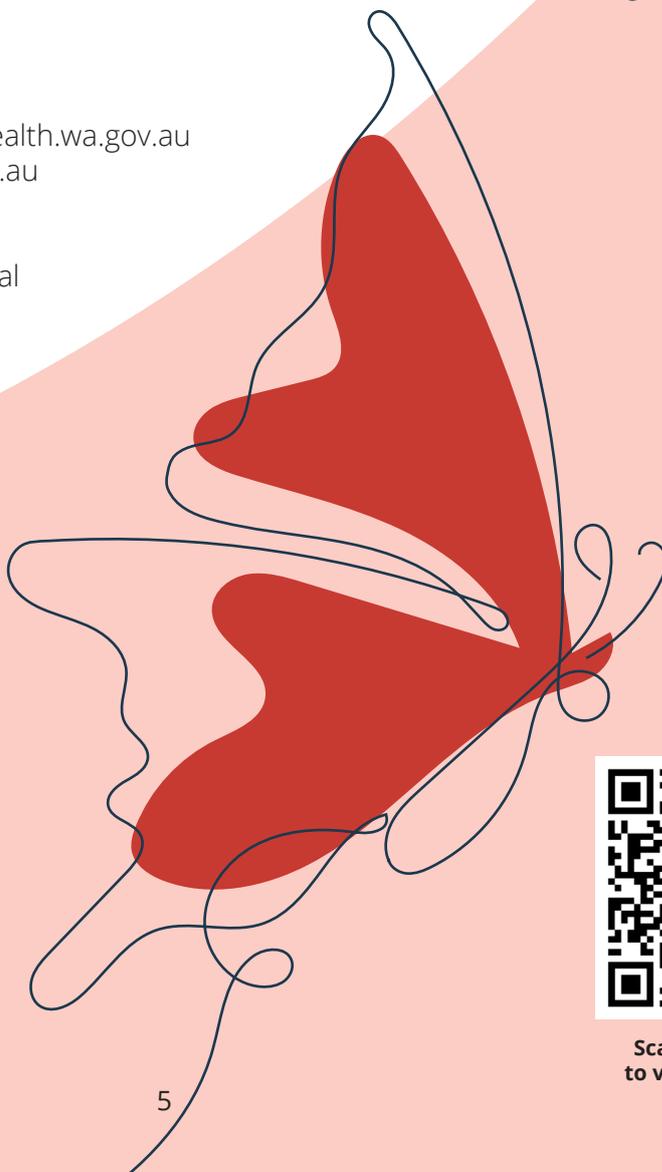
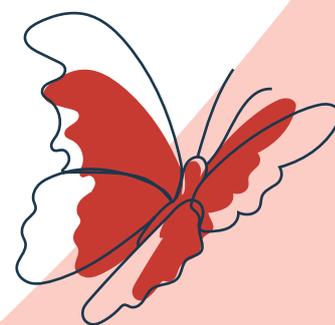
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