

After a homicide

Answers to common questions

here
for
you

These FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) might help you with any questions you have. You can call us 24/7 on 0800 842 846 to be connected to a support worker.

You can also find comprehensive homicide support information on our website – go to www.victimsupport.org.nz and look for Homicide in the GET SUPPORT section.

1. What happens to my loved one?

After every unexplained sudden death, the law requires police to investigate the cause. Sometimes it can be unclear if a death was by homicide or another cause. For this reason, the person's body may need to remain at the scene for some time until a full forensic investigation has been completed. Police will collect all related physical evidence needed to assist in their investigation. They will take photos and sometimes might need to take personal items away, but these will be recorded and returned later. (See question 13 below.)

The forensic investigation can be upsetting, but police must do this. There will be an officer in charge of the scene that you can speak with or you can talk to your Police family liaison officer. After this scene investigation has been completed, police will ask the duty funeral director to take the person's body to the nearest mortuary with the necessary services, which may be outside your area. (This is at no cost to you.) The person's body will then be safely kept at the mortuary until they are formally identified, and the cause of death is confirmed.

At the mortuary, a post mortem (or autopsy) must be completed. (See more about this below.) The hospital mortuary team work respectfully at all times and are led by pathologists, who are specially trained doctors.

When the person's body has been formally released from the mortuary, immediate family or whānau can decide together to either collect the person's body themselves or to contact a funeral director to do this.

2. How will police help us?

Police will assign a family liaison officer to support your family and let you know what's happening throughout the investigation and the court case. They can answer any questions you have about any aspect of the case and will tell you how to contact them. The police are dedicated to working hard to find and bring to justice the person who did the crime.

3. When can we see the body of our loved one?

Before the post mortem, close family members or whānau may be able to view and spend time with the person's body at the mortuary, but there is likely to be a screen or window between.

All viewings must be authorised and organised by the duty coroner. This is because the body remains the responsibility of the coroner until it is released. Cultural and spiritual considerations will be taken into account by the coroner when they make their decision. For example, you can ask for someone like a church minister or spiritual advisor to be with you at the viewing, or to be at the viewing on your behalf.

You can ask the Police family liaison officer or Victim Support worker to help you arrange a viewing through the duty coroner's office, or contact that office directly yourself.

Some hospitals have a family or whānau room for viewing, with a screen or window between them and their loved one. The family won't be able to

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touch the body or remove items from the body. For cultural or spiritual reasons, families can sometimes sit in a dedicated whānau room until the person's body has been released to them.

Unfortunately, it isn't always possible to view the person. This is usually when they've been very badly injured. If this happens, the staff will talk with you about this.

If you wish, you can also talk to a funeral director about any other options there are for sitting with or viewing the person's body after it has been released from the mortuary, or about following any specific cultural traditions you need respected at this time.

If family and whānau do decide to view the body at any stage, it can help for them to know that the person's body will look different. For example, their facial features and skin colour are likely to have changed. This is normal but can be unsettling for some.

4. What is a post mortem?

A post mortem (or autopsy) is ordered by the coroner, who is the person legally responsible for establishing how a person has died. The post mortem is done by a pathologist, who is a specially trained doctor. They will examine the person's body to find out exactly how they died. It may be a full post mortem, which means the person's whole body is surgically examined internally and externally. Or it may be a lesser post mortem, when only the external body, a particular part of it, blood, or tissue is examined.

5. How long will the post mortem take?

Every effort is made to conduct the post mortem quickly, within 1-3 days. There can be delays for practical reasons, but they will always be kept to a minimum. Your Police family liaison officer will explain why there is any delay or ask your support worker to find out.

6. Do I or my family have a choice about whether a post mortem takes place?

No, not when a death appears to have been caused by a crime. However, you do have the right to request that it's done, as much as possible, in a culturally appropriate way. For example, that certain rituals are completed with the person's body within a certain time, or in a certain way.

- To request this, you must do so as soon as possible. Tell the duty coroner's office immediately by phoning 0800 266 800 and also inform your Police family liaison officer.
- The coroner will decide if they can grant your cultural request or not. If they cannot, they will explain why.

At any time you are also welcome to talk with one for the mortuary team about any questions you have about the post mortem process.

For more information about the coronial process:

- See our Coronial Process section under Practical Information on our website <https://www.victimsupport.org.nz/> or ask your support worker for a copy of it.
- Read more about the Coronial Process on the coroner's website <https://coronialservices.justice.govt.nz/>

7. What happens when their body is released from the mortuary?

When this happens, immediate family and whānau will decide together to either collect the person's body themselves or to contact a funeral director to do this. If you choose a funeral director, they can liaise with the mortuary directly to arrange things, which can be very helpful.

8. How can I contact a funeral director?

You can find a local funeral director listed in these directories or ask family, whānau, or friends for recommendations:

- Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand <https://www.funeraldirectors.co.nz/planning-a-funeral/find-a-funeral-director/>
- NZIFH Independent Funeral Homes <https://nzifh.org.nz/find-a-member/>

9. Can we get body samples back, if any have been taken?

A pathologist may need to take small pieces of tissue or some fluids from the person's body for testing. Before the person's body is released from the mortuary, a Coronial Services staff member will call to let you know if there are any body tissue samples that are being kept for more testing.



To find out how you can get the samples back, or what you can do if the pathologist wants to keep tissue samples, speak with the duty coroner's office, or ask your Support Worker for help to do this. The Coronial Services booklet, *When Someone Dies Suddenly* (pages 8-9) has some helpful information and can be downloaded by going to <https://coronialservices.justice.govt.nz/>

10. Can we see the post mortem report?

Yes. The immediate family can, if they wish, ask to read a copy of the final post mortem report. This is written by the pathologist for the coroner. It can be disturbing to read and hard to understand, so talking it through with your doctor can be helpful. To get a copy, make sure you have given your details to your local coroner's office or ask your Police family liaison officer or support worker to assist you with this.

11. Who will keep us informed about what is happening?

Up until the person's body is released to the immediate family following a post mortem, a staff member of the duty coroner's office will keep you informed about what is happening. The Police family liaison officer can also. You can contact them with any concerns or requests that you have.

After that, a dedicated coronial case manager will help you and your family throughout the coronial process. They will keep you updated about what's happening and answer any questions you may have. They'll let you know, for example, when and where an inquest will be held and what to expect at it. They'll give you their contact details. It can be helpful to choose one family member to be the key contact person on behalf of the family.

Your support worker can also answer any questions, provide information, and advocate on your behalf.

12. Can we visit the place where our loved one was found?

Yes, but only after Police have completed their investigation at the scene.

13. What will happen with any items taken away by Police?

If Police do remove items at the scene they will return these to you once all investigations are complete. If they are needed as evidence for a court case, they will be returned after the case has gone through the criminal justice system and all hearings

have been heard. This could take some time depending on the length of the court proceedings.

14. When can we go back to our home?

If the family home is where the crime happened, those living there may not be allowed to enter their home immediately. This is so Police can complete their investigation, to help find out the cause of death and any clues about who may have been involved. In these cases, a Police officer will be in charge at the scene. They can tell you when you will be able to enter the house again, or ask your Police family liaison officer.

If this happens, Victim Support may be able to provide financial support until you can enter your home again. Speak with your support worker for more information.

15. Can we have the scene blessed?

Yes, if you wish to, you can have the site of the crime spiritually cleansed or blessed. A ceremonial blessing of the site where a person has died can be an important step in helping people come to terms with the tragic loss of life. It is an acknowledgement of the spiritual impact of the tragedy on so many people. It commends the spirit of the person who has died and respects the dignity of them, and of their family, whānau, and community.

A blessing usually includes a simple prayer or karakia. For Māori, a blessing can include a clearing of the tapu on the site. Different cultural and faith groups bring their own approaches.

If you would like to arrange a blessing of the site, you could contact your local church or faith centre, your local marae, your cultural leaders, your Police family liaison officer, or your support worker.

16. Can we have the scene cleaned?

Yes. Ask your Police family liaison officer or your support worker about how this could be arranged. There is a grant available through Victim Support for the house or scene to be professionally cleaned once all evidence has been gathered.

17. What if the person died overseas?

Advice and information is available from New Zealand embassies in the country concerned and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade can help you. They can liaise with Police in New Zealand and the country the person died in about the local investigation and justice process.



They can let you know about:

- official processes required in the country the person died in
- available local burial or cremation options and any requirements that must be met
- contact details for funeral directors in that country who could manage the funeral or tangihanga
- how you can bring back the person's body or ashes (repatriation) to New Zealand.

See www.safetravel.govt.nz/death

If a person's body or their ashes are being returned to New Zealand

The immediate family need to ask a New Zealand funeral director and a funeral director in the country where the death occurred to work together to look after all the necessary arrangements. All costs involved must be paid for by the immediate family.

To find a funeral director to assist with repatriation

- Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand
www.fdanz.org/planning-a-funeral/find-a-funeral-director/
- NZIFH Independent Funeral Homes
<https://nzifh.org.nz/find-a-member/>

For requirements when bringing the person's ashes into New Zealand

- NZ Customs
<https://www.customs.govt.nz/personal/prohibited-and-restricted-items/>

Urgent travel

- For details on how to get an urgent passport if you need to travel overseas to attend the person's funeral or tangihanga
<https://www.passports.govt.nz/Urgent-travel>
- Air New Zealand offers some compassionate flights, see their website for more information
<https://www.airnewzealand.co.nz/compassionate-fares>

18. How can we tell and support our children and young people?

Our information sheet *After a homicide:*

Supporting children and young people will be very helpful.

You can download it from the homicide section of our website www.victimsupport.org.nz under GET SUPPORT.

19. Can we get counselling?

Yes. Counselling is available in most cities and towns and a support worker can help you access what is available near your local community.

You can call us 24/7 on **0800 842 846** to be connected with a support worker.

20. Can we get financial help?

Your support worker can explain the limited circumstances in which some financial assistance may be available after a homicide.

21. Will someone explain the court process?

Yes, if the person who has done this crime is arrested and taken to court. The court process is complicated, with a lot of legal procedures and legal language involved. Some criminal cases are long and difficult, with unpredictable delays that may be hard to understand. It helps to know what might happen and when, how you can participate, and where you can get support. We are here to support you along the way, to explain things, answer questions, and to advocate for your information needs. Court victim advisors (CVAs) are also available at court for all victims to advise and update you.

For more information on the court system and going to court (including as a witness), what happens after sentencing and the parole process

- Practical Information section on the Victim Support website www.victimsupport.org.nz
- Ministry of Justice website
<https://www.victiminfo.govt.nz/en/home/police-investigation/#step-7>

