

# Answers to common questions

## After a suicide

### 1. When can we see the body of the person who died?

After every sudden unexplained death, the law requires the police to investigate the cause to make sure no one else was involved in the person's death. Sometimes it can be unclear if a death was by suicide or another cause, so the person's body may need to remain at the scene for some time until a full forensic investigation has been completed. After this, police will ask the duty funeral director to take the person to the mortuary, which is located at the nearest hospital. There is no cost to you for this. At the mortuary, a post mortem (autopsy) must be completed. (See question 2)

Before the post mortem, close family or whānau members may be able to view and spend time with the person's body at the mortuary. All viewings must be authorised by the duty coroner, because the body remains the responsibility of the coroner until it is released to the immediate family. To request and arrange a viewing, contact the duty coroner's office. Some hospitals have a family or whānau room for viewing. However, the family may not be able to touch the body or remove items from the body.

Unfortunately, it isn't always possible to view the person's body. This is usually because they've been very badly injured. If this is the case, staff and your chosen funeral director can talk with you about your options. When the person's body has been formally released from the mortuary, immediate family or whānau can decide together to either collect the body themselves or to contact a funeral director to do this.

You can talk with the funeral director about being able to view the person's body at their funeral home. The family and whānau need to be prepared for the person's body to look different – e.g., their facial features and skin colour are likely to have changed and the body will be cold to the touch. This is normal but can be unsettling.

### 2. What is a post mortem?

A post mortem is ordered by the coroner, who is the person legally responsible for establishing how a person 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, when the person's whole body is surgically examined both 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.

The immediate family or whānau has the right to object to the autopsy. (See question 4)

The immediate family and whānau can, if they wish, request to see a copy of the final post mortem report. It can be disturbing to read and hard to understand, so it can be helpful to talk it through with your doctor.

### 3. 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. The mortuary staff will explain why there are any delays. If the death was on a Friday, the post mortem might not take place until the following Monday.

### 4. Do we have a choice about whether a post mortem takes place?

The immediate family or whānau have the right to object to the post mortem, or to ask that it's done in a culturally appropriate way. The exception to this is if police suspected the death may not have been by suicide and that it might have happened as a result of a crime. In this instance, a post mortem cannot be objected to.

If you want to object or make a cultural request, this must be done as soon as possible, within 24 hours. Call the duty coroner's office on 0800 266 800 and tell the police officer in charge of the investigation. The coroner will decide if they can grant your request. If they cannot, they will explain why.

For more information on objecting to a post mortem, see pages 6–8 of Ministry of Justice publication, *When Someone Dies Suddenly* <https://coronerscourt.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Publications/MOJ0047-SEP22-FINAL-V2-WEB.pdf>

Read more about the Coronial Process on the Coroner's website <https://coronerscourt.govt.nz/>

## 5. Who will keep us informed about what is happening?

Until a person's body is released to the immediate family or whānau following a post mortem, a staff member of the duty coroner's office will keep you informed. After that, a dedicated coronial case manager will help you and your family or whānau through the coronial process, keeping you updated on what's happening and answering any questions you may have and let you know if an inquest will be held and when. They'll give you their contact details so that you can get in touch during the coronial process. It can be helpful to choose one person to be the key contact person on behalf of the family.

## 6. Can we visit the place where the person who died was found?

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

## 7. When can we go back to our home?

If the suicide happened at the family home, those living there may not be allowed to enter the home immediately. This is to enable police to complete their investigation and to find the cause of death. In these cases, a police officer will be in charge at the scene and can tell you when you will be able to enter the house again.

## 8. Can we have the scene blessed?

Yes, if you wish to, you can have the site of the suicide spiritually cleansed or blessed. If you would like to arrange a blessing of the site, you could contact your church or faith centre, local marae, cultural leaders, or the officer in charge of your case.

## 9. Can we have the scene cleaned?

Yes. Some companies provide specialist forensic cleaning services. Ask the police officer in charge at the scene about how this could be arranged.

## 10. What will happen with any items taken away by police?

If police remove items at the scene, these will be returned to you once the investigation has been completed.



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

Our information sheet, *After a suicide – Supporting children or young people* will be very helpful. Download it from the **Useful Resources** page on the [afterasuicide.nz](http://afterasuicide.nz) website.

## 12. Can we get counselling?

Yes. You can access Aoake te Rā, a free suicide bereavement service that offers between six and eight counselling sessions with trained therapists. Email them at [referrals@aoake-te-ra.org.nz](mailto:referrals@aoake-te-ra.org.nz), or leave a message on 0800 000 053 containing your name and contact details.

You can also phone 1737, a free, confidential helpline to speak with a counsellor (24/7).

## 13. Can we get financial help?

ACC is not generally available except in very limited circumstances.

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