



County of Los Angeles Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner FACT SHEET

CAUSE OF DEATH:

The cause of death is the underlying medical condition, disease, injury or poison (alcohol, drug or toxic substance) that led to the death of a person, generally determined by medical examiners after completing an examination of the body. The County of Los Angeles Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner (DMEC) conducts two types of body examinations:

- **External examination only:** The medical examiner is able to determine the cause of death by external examination of the body.
- **External examination with autopsy:** The medical examiner performs an external examination of the body followed by an autopsy to determine the cause of death. The autopsy is a surgical procedure of the chest, abdomen, pelvis and head to determine the cause of death by examining organs.

MANNER OF DEATH:

The manner of death is the description of the circumstances surrounding the death. There are five manners of death:

- **Accident** – an unnatural death resulting from an inadvertent chance happening when there is no evidence of intent to harm.
- **Homicide** – due to the action of one person directly causing the death of another.
- **Natural** – due mostly to disease or natural process.
- **Suicide** – due to a self-inflicted injury that occurred with the intent to induce self-harm or cause one's own death.
- **Undetermined** – when there is inadequate information regarding the circumstances of death to determine manner, the manner of death may be certified as undetermined. A designation of undetermined can apply also where known information equally supports or conflicts with more than one manner of death or, in cases of unnatural death, when a clear preponderance of evidence supporting a specific manner (homicide, accident, or suicide) is not available.

About the County of Los Angeles Department of Medical Examiner-Coroner

The DMEC is a neutral and independent office, separate from any law enforcement agency. California law (California Government Code 27491) requires the DMEC to inquire into and determine the circumstances, manner, and cause of all sudden, violent, or unusual deaths, and those deaths where the decedent has not been seen by a physician 20 days prior to death within Los Angeles County. The cause of death is determined through unbiased forensic investigation and scientific means by a Deputy Medical Examiner and a death certificate is issued after the examination is completed. The Department handles roughly 13,000 cases a year.

The DMEC's mission is to provide independent, quality, death investigation using advanced forensic science with compassion and objectivity for families, communities, and public health & safety, as well as to work collaboratively to reduce preventable deaths.

What is a Medical Examiner?

A medical examiner (ME) is a physician trained in forensic pathology, a branch of medicine dealing with the diagnosis of disease and causes of death through body examination. A ME's duty is to investigate deaths occurring under unusual or suspicious circumstances by performing examinations of the bodies postmortem (after death) to determine the cause and manner of death. A ME is not a law enforcement official and is not employed by a law enforcement agency.

