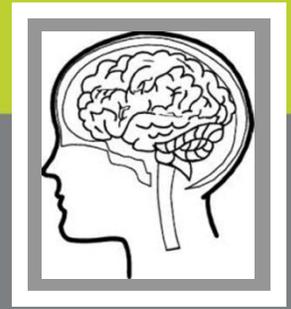


Understanding Brain Death

A guide for patients and their families



You are probably reading this information because someone close to you has died. In addition to coping with your fear and grief, you are trying to understand everything doctors and nurses are telling you.

This information will not take away your feelings of pain and loss. However, we hope it will help you and your family to understand what is happening.

What is brain death?

Brain death happens when the brain has no oxygen or blood flow. Without oxygen or blood, the brain dies. There are two ways doctors decide if a patient is dead:

- One is when the heart and lungs have stopped working.
- The other is when the entire brain has stopped working.

The second is known as brain death. A patient cannot recover from brain death.

What causes brain death?

Brain death is caused by a severe and permanent brain injury. The most common causes are:

- Traumatic brain injury
- Stroke
- Bleeding in the brain
- Loss of oxygen or blood flow to the brain

How does a doctor determine that a patient has died?

Doctors use a set of tests called the **brain death exam** to determine if a patient is brain dead. During the exam, doctors test to see whether the brain is working. This includes controlling breathing.

The patient is declared legally dead by the doctor if the brain is not working and there are no signs of breathing.

The brain death exam is done when a patient has had a severe and permanent brain injury and there is no sign that the brain is working.



Answers to Commonly Asked Questions

How is brain death different than a coma?

Patients in a coma have also had a severe brain injury. They are completely unconscious. However, in a coma patient, parts of the brain are still working a little. In a brain dead patient, the brain is not working at all.

What does brain death look like?

Brain dead patients look asleep, but they are not. They do not hear or feel anything, including pain. This is because the parts of the brain that feel, sense and respond to the world no longer work.

In addition, the brain can no longer tell the body to breathe. Because the brain cannot control breathing, breathing must be done by a machine, called a ventilator.

Does anyone recover from brain death?

Sadly, no one has ever recovered after being declared brain dead.

Does the body of a brain dead patient begin to deteriorate even if the patient is on artificial respiratory support?

Yes. The failure of many organs begins to occur soon after brain death.

Will removing the respiratory support equipment be the same as causing the death of my loved one?

No. Brain death means your loved-one is already dead. You cannot cause death by removing respiratory support.

What happens next?

Sometimes we must accept things we cannot change. When brain death is declared, it is time to accept that your loved one is dead and allow the grieving process to begin.

You will be provided with a reasonably brief period of time from when the patient is declared brain dead to gather family or next of kin at the patient's bedside until discontinuation of cardiopulmonary support occurs.

There are several end-of-life decisions that you will have to make. The care-team, including end-of-life specialists, are here to support you and will provide you with information.