

*No feeling  
of pain  
or  
suffering*

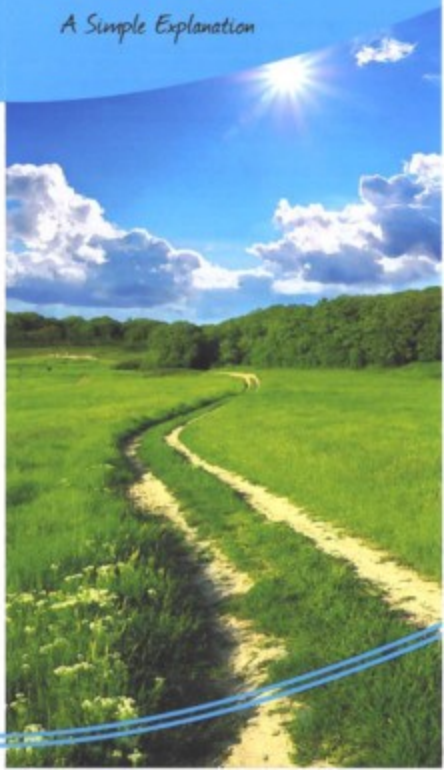


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# Understanding Brain Death

*A Simple Explanation*



The diagnosis of brain death is defined as "death based on the absence of all neurological function." It may be very difficult to understand. This will help to explain brain death and provide information to help answer some of your questions.

#### **What does "brain death" mean?**

Brain death is a legal definition of death. It is the complete and irreversible cessation (stopping) of all brain function. It means that, as a result of severe trauma or injury to the brain, the body's blood supply to the brain is blocked, the brain dies and it cannot be revived.

Brain death is death. It is permanent and cannot be reversed.

#### **What are some of the causes of brain death?**

This can be caused by head trauma from motor vehicle accidents, falls, gunshot wounds, hemorrhages into the brain from aneurysms and strokes, medication overdose, drowning and poisoning, among others.

#### **How is it decided that my loved one is brain dead?**

A physician conducts the required medical tests to make the diagnosis of brain death. These tests are based on sound and legally accepted medical guidelines. Among other things, tests may include a clinical examination to show that your loved one has no brain reflexes and cannot breathe on their own.

#### **Simple signs of brain death include**

- The pupils do not react to light.
- There is no gag reflex when a tongue depressor is placed behind the tongue.
- The eyes won't blink when touched.

Additionally, other evidence may include a blood flow test (cerebral angiogram) or an EEG (electroencephalogram). These tests are done to confirm the absence of blood flow or brain activity.

Your loved one may exhibit spinal activity or reflexes such as twitching or muscle contraction. Spinal reflexes are caused by electrical impulses that remain in the spinal column. These reflexes are possible even though the brain is dead. You can ask your doctor to explain or show you how brain death was determined for your loved one.

#### **What happens to our loved one while these tests are being done?**

Your loved one is placed on a machine that breathes for them, called a ventilator. This is because the brain can no longer send signals telling the body to breathe. Special medications to help maintain blood pressure and other body functions may also be given to your loved one. During the testing for brain death, the ventilator and medications are continued, but they do not interfere with the brain death determination.

#### **Are there drugs that can stop the brain from working and give a false diagnosis?**

Certain drugs can mask brain functions such as muscle relaxants and sedatives. When the brain death tests are performed, your loved one will have only low levels of these drugs in the body. The physician can then accurately measure brain activity. Often, other tests are done to confirm brain death if certain drugs are present.

#### **If our loved one is really dead, why is his heart still beating?**

As long as the heart has oxygen, it can continue to work. The ventilator provides the body enough oxygen to keep the heart beating for several hours. Without this artificial help, the heart would stop beating.

#### **Is it possible our loved one is just in a coma?**

No. Brain death is not a coma. A patient in a coma continues to have brain activity and function. When brain death occurs all brain function ceases. Once brain function ceases, there is no chance for recovery.

#### **Is there anything else that can be done?**

Before brain death is declared, everything possible to save your loved one's life is done. After the diagnosis of brain death is made, there is no chance of recovery. There is no medical miracle that will reverse brain death.

#### **What happens after my loved one is declared brain dead?**

Once the diagnosis of brain death is made, your loved one is pronounced legally dead. This is the time that should appear on the death certificate. The time of death is not the time when the ventilator is removed.

#### **Remember that your loved one is already legally dead and removing the ventilator does not cause death.**

Saying goodbye to a loved one who is brain dead is a very difficult experience. Your loved one may look as if he were only sleeping. The heart monitors may indicate that the heart is still beating. Your loved one may be warm to the touch and have color in the face. But, in fact, your loved one is dead.

#### **Does our loved one feel any pain or suffer after brain death is declared?**

No. There is no feeling of pain or suffering.

#### **What happens next?**

A health care professional will talk with you about certain decisions you need to make at this time.

This was prepared for you by other families who have had a loved one declared brain dead. During that time we found ourselves with questions about what "brain death" really meant. Some of us were still yearning for answers to these questions months, even years, and later. We finally found these answers and wanted to share them with you.

*Our thoughts continue to be with you.*