

# Understanding **Brain Death**

Frequently asked questions  
to help you understand  
brain death.



## What is brain death?

The diagnosis of brain death is defined as “death based on the absence of all neurologic function.” This can be very difficult to understand.

Brain death is defined as the complete and irreversible loss of all brain function. It means that, as a result of severe trauma or injury, blood circulation to the brain stops. The brain dies, and it cannot be revived.

Many things can cause brain death. Most commonly, these include heart attacks, strokes, aneurysms, overdoses, drowning and traumatic events such as falls or accidents.

## Is brain death the same as being in a coma?

Brain death is not a coma. In a coma, there is still some brain function. Once brain function ceases and death is declared, there is no chance of recovery. Prior to declaration, everything has been done to save your loved one. There is no medical treatment that can reverse or fix brain death.

## If I remove the ventilator, does the time of death change?

Once brain death is diagnosed, your loved one is deceased. This is the time of death on the death certificate and does not change

when the ventilator is turned off. Saying goodbye at this time may be difficult. Your loved one's body may still be warm to the touch, their chest rising when the ventilator fills the lungs with air. But, in fact, your loved one is dead. There is no feeling of pain and suffering has ended.

## How do you know my loved one is dead?

Brain death is a standardized medical diagnosis. According to each state's law, doctors examining the patient will conduct a number of tests to determine whether any brain activity is present. If all brain activity is absent, the patient is dead. You can ask your doctor to explain or show you how this was determined.

During testing, your loved one remains on a ventilator (machine that breathes for them) because the brain is no longer sending or receiving signals that tell the body to breathe.

Medicines may be given to maintain blood pressure and other body functions. These medications and the ventilator will continue to support your loved one's body but will not interfere with the brain death determination.

Your loved one, even though they are declared brain dead, can still have a heartbeat. The heart will continue to beat as long as it is receiving oxygen from the ventilator. Without this artificial support, the heart would stop beating.

## What now?

After brain death is declared, there may be additional end-of-life discussions and decisions to be made by legal next of kin. Among these decisions may be the gift of organ, eye and tissue donation. LifeNet Health has skilled staff trained to provide information and resources to help loved ones through this difficult time. If friends or family have additional questions, hospital staff will notify LifeNet Health and a representative will contact them.

[LifeNetHealth.org](https://www.lifenethealth.org)

