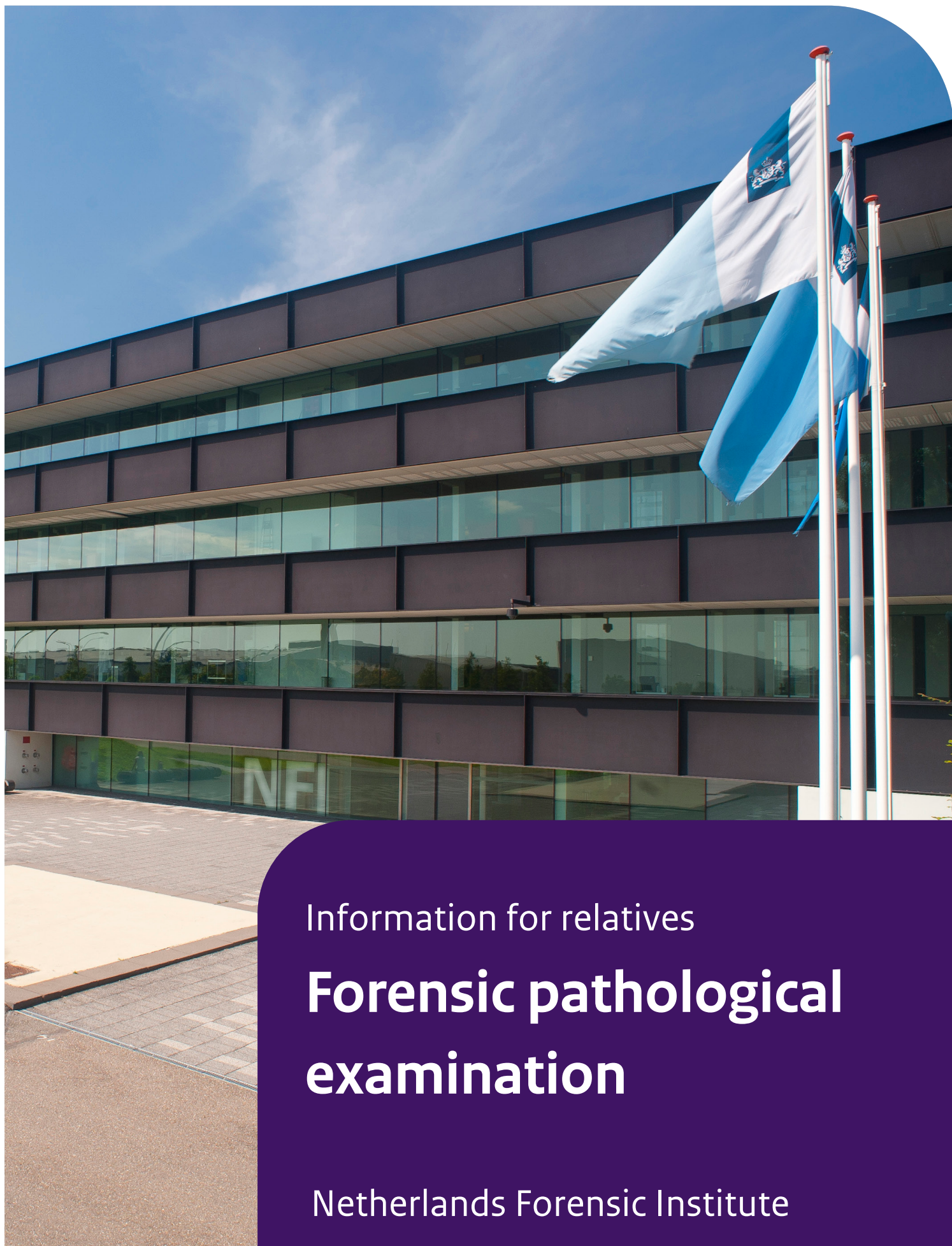




Netherlands Forensic Institute
Ministry of Justice and Security



Information for relatives

Forensic pathological examination

Netherlands Forensic Institute

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Introduction

You have received this leaflet because a relative or someone close to you has died, and a forensic pathological examination is being carried out on the body. We realise that this is a traumatic experience and offer our condolences for your loss.

The public prosecutor has decided that this forensic pathological examination is necessary. This decision was made on the basis of information from the police and the forensic pathologist. You can find more information about their examination in the leaflet 'Investigation by the police and the Public Prosecution Service into the death – Information for a relative'.

In this leaflet from the Netherlands Forensic Institute (NFI), you will find answers to frequently asked questions about the forensic pathological examination. You can also use this leaflet to explain to family members or others close to you what this examination entails.

Forensic pathological examination

Why conduct a forensic pathological examination?

The public prosecutor believes that the death is, or may be, the result of a crime. That is why the NFI has been commissioned to carry out a forensic pathological examination, which consists of several parts. The most important part is the forensic (judicial) post-mortem examination. This examination helps to determine the cause and nature of the death.

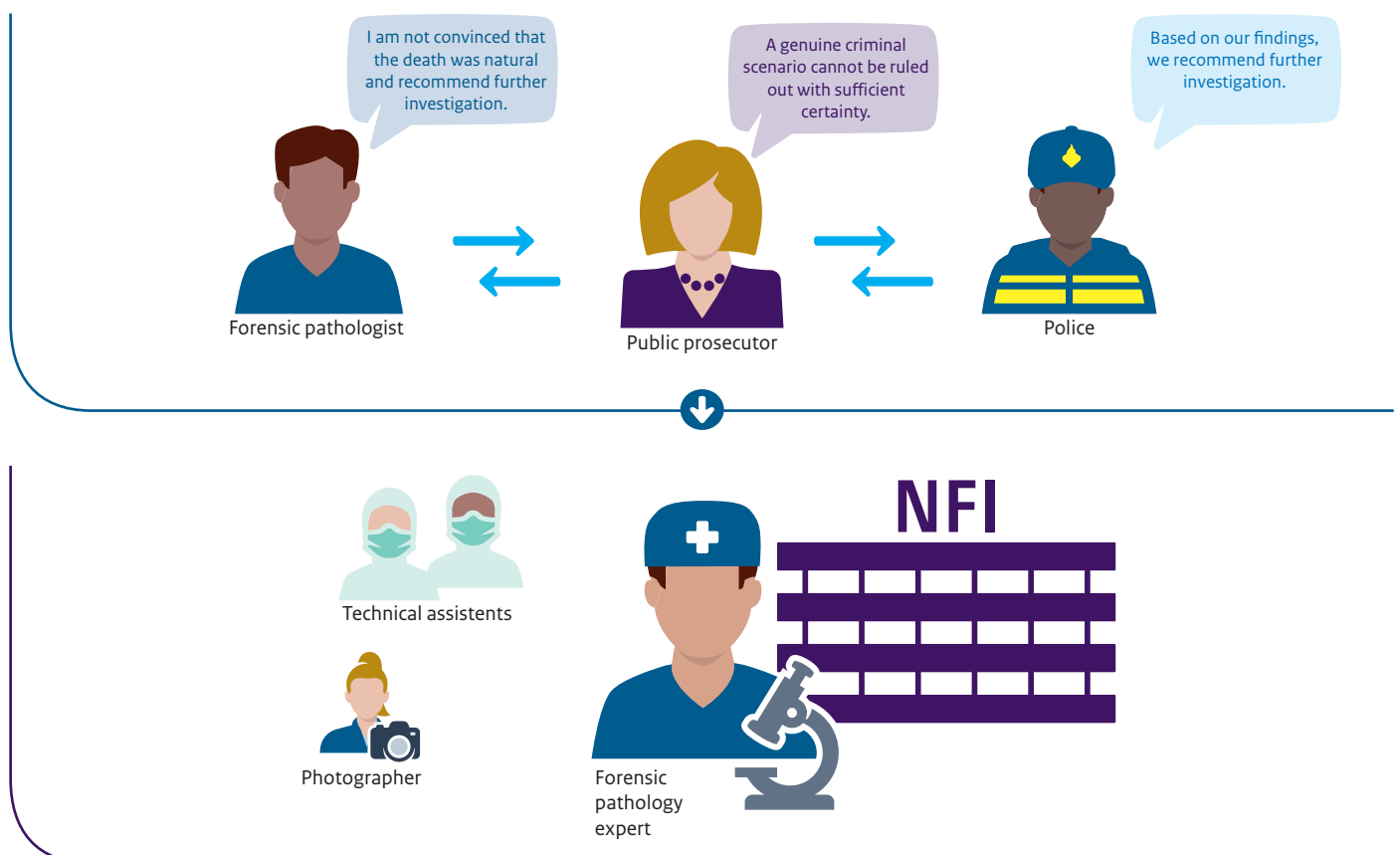
Who carries out the examination?

The forensic pathological examination is carried out by a forensic pathology expert. This is a doctor who specialises in the examination of deceased persons. This doctor assesses whether there are any injuries or other abnormalities. The doctor carries out the examination carefully and respectfully.

During the post-mortem, the doctor works alongside a photographer and technical assistants. The photographer documents key procedures and findings. The technical assistants help with the post-mortem. Police are also always present.

Where does the examination take place?

The forensic pathological examination takes place at the Netherlands Forensic Institute (NFI) in The Hague. The deceased is transported to the NFI for this purpose on the instructions of the public prosecutor. After the examination, the body is handed over to the police. The public prosecutor decides when the body may be released to the next of kin.



Forensic pathological examination

What happens during the examination?

During a forensic pathological examination, a radiological scan is usually performed first. This is followed by the post-mortem examination. During the post-mortem, the body is examined both externally and internally. This is done step by step. Bodily material is removed and preserved for further examination.

What happens during the external examination of the body?

During the external examination, the doctor examines the outside of the body to look for injuries and other abnormalities. Sometimes the hair on the head needs to be shaved partially or fully to see injuries more clearly. This is only done if it is really necessary. This examination is followed by the internal examination.

What happens during the internal examination of the body?

For the internal examination, an incision is made at the back of the head, from ear to ear. The body is opened with a Y-shaped incision at the front of the body, from the shoulders down to the pubic bone. An incision is also made at the back of the body, from the neck down to the tailbone or both buttocks. An incision is made in the thigh to take a blood sample. Sometimes a small incision is made to examine a bruise. If necessary, incisions may also be made on the back of the limbs.

The doctor examines the body, including the organs, for any injuries or other abnormalities. A small sample of each organ is retained for examination under a microscope. Additional tissue samples or bone fragments may also be retained for further examination.

What happens after the internal examination?

After the internal examination, the organs are replaced. Organs (or larger sections thereof) are retained for further examination only when necessary. All incisions are closed, usually with sutures. The body is then washed. Every effort is made to care for the body as well as possible.

The closed incisions on the front of the body are covered with plasters. These are usually not visible during the viewing. The closed incision on the head is often hidden by the hair or is covered during the viewing.

Further examinations

Are any further examinations carried out?

Additional medical examinations are often required in addition to the post-mortem. The forensic pathology expert decides on this. The doctor carries out some of these examinations personally. Sometimes other specialist doctors are consulted. The toxicological examination is carried out by the toxicology department of the NFI. Examinations may also take place in a hospital laboratory. The results of these additional medical examinations are included in the report on the forensic pathological examination.

The public prosecutor may also commission other additional examinations by the NFI, such as testing of bodily material for DNA, metal fragments or other traces. These examinations are carried out by other experts at the NFI. The results of these examinations are not included in the forensic pathology report but are sent directly to the public prosecutor.

What additional examinations are commonly carried out?

Light microscopy

Small tissue samples are retained during the post-mortem examination. At the NFI, these samples are cut into thin sections and placed on slides. The forensic pathology expert examines these sections under a microscope to check for any diseases or other abnormalities.

Toxicological examination

A toxicological examination is often carried out following the post-mortem. This involves analysing bodily material, such as blood and urine. The toxicologist checks for the presence of alcohol, drugs, medication or other substances. The results of this examination are passed on to the forensic pathology expert.

Neuropathological examination

If necessary, the brain is preserved for examination by a forensic neuropathologist. This is a doctor who specialises in brain examination. This involves looking for injuries, diseases, age-related changes or congenital abnormalities. The results of this examination are passed on to the forensic pathology expert.

Examination in children

Broadly speaking, the forensic pathological examination of children follows the same procedure as for adults. In the case of babies and young children, it is particularly important to investigate whether there are any congenital abnormalities, metabolic disorders or growth disorders. For this reason, more examinations are often carried out on children than on adults, and it usually takes longer for the final report to be completed.

After the forensic pathological examination

How will I be informed of the outcome of the examination?

The forensic pathology expert will draw up a report containing the results of the forensic pathological examination and explain what they mean. This report will also include a conclusion regarding the cause of death. The report is sent to the public prosecutor. The NFI is not permitted to share this report directly with the next of kin.

You can request the report, or parts of it, via the police or the Public Prosecution Service. The public prosecutor decides whether you can receive this information. The report contains distressing and medical information. Your GP can help you to better understand the report. Victim Support Netherlands can also assist you with this.

What bodily material is retained?

During a post-mortem examination, bodily fluids (such as blood and urine) and small tissue samples are retained. If organs or larger organ parts are retained, you will be informed of this by the police.

How can I submit a request for the transfer of bodily material?

You can ask us to return any preserved organs to you at a later date. You can then have these organs buried with the deceased or cremated. To do so, please send an email to frontdesk@nfi.nl. In this email, please state that you wish to receive the organs, and include the name, date of birth and date of death of the deceased.

Following your request, the Netherlands Forensic Institute will first seek permission from the public prosecutor. For assistance with reclaiming the bodily material, you can also contact Victim Support Netherlands. Bodily fluids and small tissue samples will not be released.

A request to obtain bodily material must be made within five years of the date of the post-mortem examination. The Netherlands Forensic Institute will cover the costs of transporting the bodily material to the funeral home. If no request is made, the Netherlands Forensic Institute will ensure that the bodily material is cremated with due respect.

Where can I go if I have any questions?

You can direct any questions to the family liaison officer (or officers) assigned to you or to Victim Support Netherlands.

You may be dissatisfied with the Netherlands Forensic Institute. If you wish to make a complaint, you can do so via www.forensischinstituut.nl/en/contact.



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