



Veterinary Medical Diagnostic Laboratory

University of Missouri

Necropsy FAQ for Companion Animal Owners

The loss of a pet can be difficult for the whole family. If you are considering a necropsy, please review the content below to help you make an informed decision.

What is a necropsy?

A necropsy is a detailed postmortem examination, usually to determine the cause of death or characterize the extent of disease. A highly trained professional called a veterinary pathologist performs the examination.

The first step of the necropsy exam is a thorough dissection. All tissues and organ systems are examined to identify anatomic abnormalities or other lesions. This dissection is very invasive, and the remains are **not** suitable for viewing after the procedure (see second page for more details). Any findings are carefully documented. This is referred to as the "gross" examination.

The second step (if elected) is a microscopic examination. Tissue samples are placed in fixative overnight and trimmed down to size. The tissues are embedded in wax, and properly stained glass slides are prepared. The pathologist reviews all of the slides under a microscope and documents any findings. Special staining or immunostaining may be used, if indicated. This microscopic examination is referred to as "histopathology."

Finally, fresh tissues may be submitted for infectious disease testing, if elected. This includes bacterial cultures and molecular testing for viruses and other pathogens. This laboratory testing is included only with the "complete necropsy" option.

What are the necropsy options?

The necropsy options offered by the VMDL are gross only (first step only), gross with histopathology (first and second steps), or complete necropsy (all three steps, including infectious disease testing). If you need a recommendation, our team can assist you.

What if I'm worried about poisoning or other intoxication?

The VMDL has a veterinary toxicologist on staff, but toxicology testing is not included in the cost of our necropsy procedures. Generally, it's best to perform the necropsy first to see if a cause of death is identified or if there are any findings consistent with a particular type of intoxication. Specific toxicology testing can then be used for confirmation. If you're worried about an intoxication, please let us know so that we can collect and hold the appropriate samples for toxicology testing.

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How should I preserve my pet until they are delivered to the laboratory?

Specimens for necropsy should be refrigerated or kept cold until they are received at the laboratory. Freezing should be avoided, as it causes changes in the tissues. However, if the remains have been frozen, a necropsy can still be performed.

What are my options for the remains?

Group cremation with no ash return is performed after necropsy, for a small additional fee, and is the standard method of disposition of remains at the VMDL.

The VMDL also works with a several companies that offer private cremation with ash return and other specialty services like pawprints. If you are interested in private cremation, the VMDL can provide contact information for these businesses. You will be responsible for making the arrangements and paying them directly for their services. The crematorium of your choice will automatically pick up your pet’s remains once the arrangements have been made.

Picking up remains for home burial is strongly discouraged. It is a potential biosecurity hazard for you and your family. Should you wish to pursue this option, a cosmetic necropsy is required. A cosmetic necropsy involves closing the body cavities with sutures and cleaning the remains. Since this procedure takes significant time and effort, an additional fee is applied to the cost of necropsy. Additionally, the necropsy examination is less thorough, since parts of the body must remain intact for cosmesis. Cosmetic necropsy is only available for small animals, and you will be required to sign a release when you collect the remains from the VMDL.

Please feel free to contact us with any questions about our necropsy procedures. Additional information including driving directions and current pricing can be found on our website at <http://vmdl.missouri.edu/>.

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