



BRIGHAM AND
WOMEN'S HOSPITAL

Understanding
Brain Death





Understanding Brain Death

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

We know that the information in this booklet will not take away your feelings of pain and loss. However, we hope it will help you and your family 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 do doctors decide if a patient is brain dead?

Doctors use a set of tests called the ***brain death exam*** to decide 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.

Does anyone recover from brain death?

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

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. As long as the ventilator is working, the heart will keep beating.



You may see a brain dead patient make movements. These movements are reflexes. They are not because the brain is working.

How is brain death different than 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.

Some patients in a coma may improve, but brain dead patients never get better.

What happens when brain death is declared?

When doctors declare brain death, the patient is legally dead. The doctors and nurses will turn off the ventilator. Family members can be present with their loved one at the bedside.

Some patients will have movements at this time. However, these are reflex movements. Because the patient is not breathing, the heart will soon stop.



Additional Hospital Resources to Help Families

We know that this is a very difficult time for you. We offer social workers, chaplains, ethics consultations, and other services to help with emotional, social, or financial needs.

Helpful Brochures

Available at: **www.myicucare.org**

- **Taking Care of Yourself**
- **Why do ICU Patients Look and Act That Way?**



If you have any questions, please talk to your nurse. Let us know how we can help you during this time.



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