

Certifying External Causes of Death

A. General

1. When a death results from causes other than natural, items 55-61 should always be completed.
2. Falls, overdoses, and medication toxicity are considered to be external causes; therefore, items 55-60 must be completed.

B. Adverse Reaction to Prescribed Medication

1. Specify the condition that necessitated the medication and complete items 55-60, noting the name of the medication.

C. Poisoning and Drug Overdoses

1. Specify the type or name of the drug(s), medication(s) or other substance(s). If unknown, state "unknown drugs."

D. Aspiration and Inhalation

1. If the aspiration was due to a disease condition, specify the condition. If not, complete items 55-60.
2. Specify if aspiration involved gastric contents, food, foreign body, etc.

E. Fall

1. State how the fall occurred.
2. Specify if the fall involved a bed or other furniture, stairs, ladder, tree, wheelchair, ice, snow, iceskates, roller skates, playground equipment, etc.
3. If the fall occurred while the decedent was being carried by, or supported by, other persons, be certain to note on the death certificate.
4. If none of the above apply, specify if the fall resulted from slipping or tripping on the same level.

F. Aircraft Accident

1. Specify the type of aircraft (helicopter, ultralight, glider, private fixed-wing, commercial fixed-wing, hang glider, etc.).

G. Fire

1. Specify the origin of the fire (cigarette, stove, candle, fireplace, electrical short, ignition of flammable liquid, etc.).
2. If the fire was caused by an explosion, specify the source of the explosion (gasoline, bomb, grain dust, etc.).
3. Specify whether the fire was located in a private dwelling, other building or structure, or other locations.
4. Note whether the death resulted from ignition or melting of nightwear or other clothing and apparel.

H. Gun-related Deaths

1. Specify the type of weapon involved (e.g., handgun, rifle, shotgun, etc.).

I. Drowning

1. If the drowning did not involve a boat, specify where the drowning occurred (e.g., bathtub, swimming pool, lake, etc.) and whether or not the drowning occurred as a result of a fall into the body of water or whether the decedent was already in the water (e.g., bathing, swimming).
2. If a boat was involved, specify the type of boat (e.g., merchant ship, passenger ship, fishing boat, sailboat, canoe, kayak, inflatable craft, jetskis, etc.) and where the drowning occurred.
3. For watercraft that can be either powered or unpowered, note which was involved in the death.

J. Neglect, Abandonment or Maltreatment

1. Specify if the maltreatment was by a spouse, parent, acquaintance, official authorities, etc.

K. Legal Intervention

1. If death resulted from the actions of a law enforcement agent, whether intentionally or unintentionally, note that a law enforcement officer was involved and check the "Homicide" box in item 52.

Why is Cause of Death Information Important?

Cause of death data is important for public health surveillance, medical research, design of interventions, and funding decisions for research and development. Information from the death certificate is used by state and local health jurisdictions, university researchers, non-profit organizations, private foundations,

other state agencies, and the federal government for health assessment, disease and injury prevention, health promotion, population estimates and child death review activities.

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