

**COUNTY OF SACRAMENTO  
EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES AGENCY**



Program Document: **Determination of Death**  
Policy Number: 2033.18

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Signature on File  
EMS Medical Director

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Signature on File  
EMS Administrator

**Purpose:**

- A. To establish procedures to be utilized in the field by Sacramento County Emergency Medical Services Agency (SCEMSA) Paramedics, Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT), Emergency Medical Responders (EMR) and Public Safety for the determination of death.

**Authority:**

- A. California Health and Safety Code, Division 2.5
- B. California Code of Regulations, Title 22, Division 9

**Definitions:**

- A. Visual examination: Viewing the body with sufficient proximity and lighting to assure existence of the death determining condition.
- B. Physical examination: Palpation of the body and exposing the area as necessary to determine the existence of the condition.
- C. Absence of palpable pulses: Absence of pulses after palpating for carotid pulses for at least ten (10) seconds.
- D. Asystole by monitor: Cardiac monitor shows asystole in two (2) leads.
- E. Rigor Mortis: Physical examination with rigidity in jaw and one limb.
- F. Livor Mortis: Discoloration appearing on dependent parts of the body after death as a result of cessation of circulation, stagnation of blood and settling of blood by gravity.

**Protocol:**

- A. Paramedics, EMTs, EMRs, and Public Safety will not initiate nor continue cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) when death has been determined,

respective to the individual's scope of practice, using the criteria outlined below.

**Criteria:**

Conditions with minimal confirming examination and assessment necessary to determine death without a physician's order.

- A. In all cases when determination is considered, it is assumed that there is no breathing, no pulse and no response to stimuli. If there is any doubt, initiate cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Assessment for confirming conditions shall take thirty (30) seconds or less.
- B. Obvious Death confirmed with visual exam- EMT, EMR, Public Safety, or Paramedic:
  - 1. Decapitation
  - 2. Incineration of the torso and/or head
  - 3. Decomposition
  - 4. Separation or destruction of brain and/or heart from the body
  - 5. Rigor Mortis
  - 6. Livor Mortis

**Determination of Death – Paramedic only:**

- A. Traumatic injuries (if appropriate; respect the possibility of a crime scene):
  - 1. Absence of all pulses, and
  - 2. Asystole by monitor in two (2) leads, or
  - 3. Pulseless electrical activity (PEA) with heart rate  $\leq$  40 bpm.
- B. Documented submersion  $\geq$  60 minutes.
- C. In all other circumstances (except Do Not Resuscitate cases) full resuscitation will be initiated.
- D. In all cases when death has been determined, notification of the Coroner's office or law enforcement shall be done. Follow the direction of the Coroner's office/law enforcement as to who has custody of the body. Evidence of a hospice patient receiving care from a physician or registered nurse who is a member of a hospice care interdisciplinary team, within twenty (20) days before death does not require coroner notification. When the investigating agency releases prehospital personnel, only then may they depart the scene. In all cases, if

requested by the Coroners Office, documentation will be forwarded within 72 hours or sooner.

**Cross Reference:**

PD# 2085 – Do Not Resuscitate

PD# 8031 – Non-Traumatic Cardiac Arrest

PD# 8032 – Traumatic Cardiac Arrest