

DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

When reporting causes of death related to drugs and alcohol, the terminology used is extremely important. Since the death certificate must be a standalone document, it is important to convey the correct meaning. The INTERNATIONAL CLASSIFICATION OF DISEASES (ICD) manual, which was prepared by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), contains many ways to categorize deaths due to drugs and alcohol. (The ICD manual makes some assumptions according to the exact terminology used and what the majority of certifiers using that term would mean. This is necessary in order to provide comparability for a worldwide system of coding, and these assumptions were decided upon by an international board of experts in all areas of death registration.)

Please indicate whether the drug or alcohol abuse is dependent or nondependent to be sure that the death is properly classified.

The list below contains some commonly used terms and how they are interpreted by the ICD Manual. We hope this will help you in completing drug and alcohol-related death certificates. When you have completed the death certificate, analyze the information listed and ask yourself, "If I did not have access to other documents, would I know what is meant by this description?"

ALCOHOL:

- Alcohol (or ethanol) **chronic intoxication**- This is assumed to be nondependent in nature; it is classified to the category of Nondependent abuse of drugs. This term is classified under the "natural causes" section of the manual.
- Alcohol (or ethanol) **intoxication or acute intoxication** – These terms are classified under the “external causes” section of the manual, and items #32-37 of the death certificate must also be completed. **This cause of death would make it a coroner’s case and would not be completed by the physician.**
- **Alcoholism** - This term assumes dependence and is categorized to Alcohol dependence syndrome. This term is classified under the "natural causes" section of the manual.
- Alcohol **abuse** - If you use this term, please specify whether it is dependent or nondependent abuse of alcohol. (The primary assumption made by the ICD manual for alcohol abuse is that it means dependent). This term is classified under the "natural causes" section of the manual.
- Alcohol **toxicity or poisoning** - This term is classified to the "external causes" section of the manual, and items #32-37 of the death certificate must also be completed. *(This would include deaths resulting from a single episode of drinking wherein the subject ingested a toxic level of alcohol, but the terminology of toxicity or poisoning must be used.)* **This cause of death would make it a coroner’s case and would not be completed by the physician.**

DRUGS: (Note: If the name of the drug or drugs is known, please include it on the death certificate as the type of drug is also captured in the process of medical coding whenever possible.) Also, if the drug was being used to treat a condition, the condition being treated should be stated.

- Drug **abuse** - If you use this term, please specify whether it is dependent or nondependent abuse of the drug. (Unlike alcohol abuse, the primary assumption made by the ICD manual for drug abuse is that it is nondependent unless otherwise specified). This term is classified under the "natural causes" section of the manual.
- Drug **addiction** - This indicates dependent usage of the drug and is classified to the category of Drug dependence. This term is classified under the "natural causes" section of the manual.
- Drug **overdose** - This term indicates that the drug has reached toxic levels and is classified to the category of Poisoning by drugs, medicaments and biologicals. This term is classified to the "external causes" section of the

manual and items 32-38 of the death certificate must also be completed. **This cause of death would make it a coroner's case and would not be completed by the physician.**

- Drug **intoxication** or **intoxication by drug** - The term "intoxication" when related to drugs is interpreted to mean poisoning by the drug unless stated to be due to drug therapy or as a result of treatment for a condition.
- Drug **toxicity or poisoning** - This term indicates that the drug has reached toxic levels and is classified to the category of Poisoning by drugs, medicaments and biologicals whether or not the drug was given in treatment. This term is classified to the "external causes" section of the manual, and items #32-38 of the death certificate must also be completed. **This cause of death would make it a coroner's case and would not be completed by the physician.**

There is also a separate category for Drugs, medicaments and biological substances causing adverse effects in therapeutic use. This category is for correct drugs, properly administered, as the cause of an adverse effect. An adverse effect might be an allergic reaction, ulcer of stomach, etc. It does **not** include a drug which has reached toxic levels even if given in therapeutic use (e.g., Digoxin toxicity, etc.); this would be classified to drug toxicity (see above).

(Note: Depending on the terminology used and circumstances, deaths involving drugs and/or alcohol can be classified as either an "external cause" or a "natural cause." Please call the Vital Statistics office (208) 334-5979 for further information on a case by case basis.)