What does it mean to be brain dead?
When a person is brain dead, the brain can no longer function. The doctors have done all they can to treat the person's condition. However, the brain will not recover function, and the person is considered dead. The doctors will support the heart with medication. They will also provide oxygen through a ventilator, or breathing machine. The person's body can be supported for days and, sometimes, even weeks. However, there is no reason to do so.

A brain death diagnosis is final and cannot be reversed. The person will never awaken.

What causes brain death?
Brain death results from a major injury to the entire brain. Often brain swelling has injured the brainstem, which connects the brain to the body. This injury cannot be reversed.

Brain death is often caused by traumatic head injury. Other causes are brain hemorrhage (bleeding) and cardiac arrest followed by CPR.

How can doctors know for sure when a person is brain dead?
The doctor will examine the person carefully. He or she also will use several tests to make the diagnosis. The AAN’s 2010 guideline update provides the steps needed to determine brain death. It stresses three signs doctors must look for. First, the person is in a permanent coma, and the cause of the coma is known. Second, all brainstem reflexes have permanently stopped working. Third, breathing has permanently stopped. A ventilator must be used to keep the body functioning. Tests given to stimulate breathing show the person cannot breathe without the ventilator. The doctor also will rule out any conditions that may make the examination unreliable. Examples are extremely low body temperature and evidence of alcohol or drug use (prescription or other drugs).

Sometimes the doctor will confirm the examination results with a laboratory test. However, usually the examination is enough for diagnosis.

What happens after a brain death diagnosis is made?
After the examination, the doctor will spend time with the surviving family members. They will be given the amount of time they need to say good-bye to their loved one. The doctor will go over next steps the family must take to make important decisions. These include discussion of organ donation. If organ donation does not take place, the doctor will turn off the ventilator and any other support machines.