

COVID-19: Guidance for Funeral Industry Workers

Preventing the spread of COVID-19 when handling bodies

Key Points

This guidance is based on what is currently known about COVID-19 and has been adapted from NSW Health Guidelines to inform a consistent approach between the two jurisdictions where possible.

COVID-19 is spread through contact with contaminated droplets released when an infected person coughs or sneezes, or from contact with contaminated hands, surfaces or objects. Funeral directors and mortuary personnel are less likely to contract COVID-19 from deceased persons infected with the virus if they adopt appropriate infection control procedures and wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). The greatest risk is likely to come from contact with family members, in specific circumstances. The following precautionary strategies should be used to minimise public health risks and to prevent spread of disease:

- **Maintain standard, droplet and contact infection control procedures when handling or transporting bodies confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19**
- **Wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) at all times**
- **A leak-proof body bag (double bagging may be required to prevent any leakage) labelled “COVID-19 – Handle with care” should be used to store and transport the body**
- **Avoid unnecessary manipulation of the body that may expel air or fluid from the lungs**
- **If an airway remains in situ, tape or occlude the opening of the airway prior to moving the body, so that air is not expelled from the lungs**
- **Embalming of a body confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19 is not recommended**
- **Family viewing of the deceased may occur; however family members should avoid any contact with the body**
- **Maintain the recommended social distance from families and friends of the deceased**

What is the COVID-19 Virus?

COVID-19 is a disease caused by a new strain of coronavirus that has not been previously identified in humans. COVID-19 is spread through droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes, or by indirect contact with contaminated hands, surfaces or objects. People are at risk of infection if they come in close contact with someone who has COVID-19. Please refer to the Communicable Diseases Network Australia's (CDNA) [Series of National Guidelines \(SoNGs\)](#) for the latest definition of close contact.

Risk to funeral directors and mortuary personnel

Funeral directors and mortuary personnel are less likely to contract COVID-19 from deceased persons infected with the virus if they adopt appropriate infection control procedures and wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).

The greatest risk of transmission to funeral industry workers is likely to be through contact with family and friends of the deceased. For more information on stopping the spread, visit <https://www.health.gov.au/news/launch-of-the-coronavirus-covid-19-campaign>

Preparing to manage bodies with COVID-19

Before accepting deceased persons with COVID-19, funeral directors should review their own infection control policies and procedures and ensure staff are familiar with these practices. This may include providing training in hand hygiene and how to put on and remove personal protective equipment (PPE).

Precautions while handling the body include

- Avoid unnecessary manipulation of the body that may expel air from the lungs
- If an airway remains in situ, tape or occlude the opening of the airway prior to moving the body, so that air is not expelled from the lungs
- Wear appropriate PPE while handling the body at all times
- Practice hand hygiene practices before and after contact with the body, including after wearing gloves
- Perform environmental decontamination after each case, including all surfaces and equipment with a disinfectant included in the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods as a listed disinfectant with a specific virucidal claim ("kills viruses").

Personal protective equipment (PPE)

Standard infection control and occupational health and safety guidelines should always be followed while handling and preparing a body. All staff should be trained in the correct use of PPE. Persons in close contact with the body must wear:

- a clean protective outer garment, such as a gown;
- disposable gloves;
- a disposable surgical mask; and
- appropriate eye protection such as safety glasses or a face shield.

After use, PPE should be carefully removed and decontaminated (where appropriate) or disposed of into general waste as soon as practicable.

Aerosol generating procedures

The potential for airborne spread of COVID-19 is still unknown. Aerosol generating procedures should be avoided if possible. Airborne precautions should be employed when performing aerosol generating procedures, such as post-mortem use of fast spinning power tools.

Airborne precautions include:

- fluid resistant long-sleeved gown
- P2/N95 respirator (mask) – should be fit checked with each use
- face shield or safety glasses
- disposable nonsterile gloves when in contact with patient
- hand hygiene before donning and after removing gloves

Body bags

When transporting the deceased, the body must be placed and secured in a bag or wrapping in a manner that prevents the leakage of any body exudate or other substance. **Double bagging may be required to achieve this.**

The outer body bag should be clearly and permanently labelled as containing COVID 19, such as: “COVID-19 – Handle with care”.

The funeral director should only remove the body to prepare the body for viewing, cremation or burial.

Used body bags should be disposed of in clinical waste streams.

Handling of bodies

Persons who may handle deceased persons with COVID-19, such as funeral directors and morgue attendants, must comply with the guidelines specified in Part 3 of the Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Infection in Healthcare (2019) as published by the National Health and Medical Research Council. When placing a body in a bag or wrapping, a person must comply with standard and droplet and contact transmission-based precautions.

Transportation of bodies

The owner or driver of the vehicle used to transport the deceased should be informed that the body is confirmed or suspected to be infected with COVID-19.

There is no change to the usual body transport protocols for COVID-19 related deaths.

Embalming

Embalming is not recommended for bodies who died from, or with, COVID-19, as it is not clear whether embalming is safe to do. If embalming must be done, the embalmer should be certified and trained in the use of PPE consistent with contact and airborne precautions. This includes a P2/N95 respirator which has been fit-checked, gown, gloves and eye protection.

Viewing the body

Family viewing of the deceased should be allowed to take place in a funeral director's mortuary facility and standard precautions should be observed.

Family members must not kiss and should refrain from touching the deceased to minimise the risk of transmission.

If a family member does touch the body, they should wash their hands with soap and water immediately afterwards or use an alcohol-based hand rub.

Funeral services

To minimise the transmission of COVID-19, the funeral director must comply with all Public Health Orders relating to gatherings. For up-to-date information on Public Health Orders related to public gatherings, see <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/help-and-advice/public-health-directions>

Like any public gathering, there is potential for transmission of viruses between those attending a funeral. Funeral directors should consider delaying the service so that family members or critical attendees who require quarantine or isolation for COVID-19 can attend. Funeral directors should encourage and facilitate attendees at the service to practice good hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene. Clean and disinfect the area in which the service has

taken place, as well as frequently touched objects and surfaces using your regular cleaning products to reduce the risk of passing the infection on to other people.

Cremation

Funeral directors must comply with the relevant ACT regulations with regards to disposal of bodies. Infection control precautions should be used during body handling and the cremation of deceased bodies confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19.

Removal of implanted medical devices is not recommended for bodies who died from, or with, COVID-19, as it is not clear whether it is safe to do. Cremation practices should be managed accordingly.

Further information

- [ACT Health COVID-19 \(Novel Coronavirus\)](#)
- [Australian Government Department of Health Advice for funeral directors](#)
- <https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/cdna-song-novel-coronavirus.htm>
- <https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/news/covid-19-expert-update-doctors>
- <https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/guidance-postmortem-specimens.html>
- <https://www.rcpath.org/discover-pathology/news/new-briefing-on-covid-19-autopsy-practice-relating-to-possible-cases-of-covid-19.html>
- Coronial Practice Direction No. 1 of 2020, issued 25 March 2020. Possible COVID-19 deaths referred to the Coroner, ACT Coroners Court.
- Interim Coronial Practice Direction 2020, Issued 6 April 2020. Coroners Court Interim COVID19 Measures, ACT Coroners Court.

For other related COVID-19 questions that cannot be answered elsewhere, contact the Communicable Disease Control (CDC) at ACT Health by calling (02) 5124 9213 during business hours or paging (02) 9962 4155 after hours.

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