



Infection Control Expert Group Advice for funeral directors

This information sheet should be read in conjunction with our information on [What you need to know](#) and [Limits on public gatherings](#). See the Department of Health website for more information on how to stop the spread of COVID-19. Visit <https://www.health.gov.au/news/launch-of-the-coronavirus-covid-19-campaign>

Handling of bodies

There is no evidence of an increased risk of transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19 to funeral industry personnel who handle the bodies of those suspected of having, or confirmed to have, died from COVID-19.

Funeral industry personnel should always use routine body handling and infection control precautions when handling any deceased bodies. Handling of bodies, including transportation and disposal, should occur in line with the relevant legislation.

The greatest risk of transmission to funeral industry personnel 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>.

Infection control procedures and personal protective equipment

Funeral industry personnel should follow standard infection control and occupational health and safety guidelines at all times. A person must, when carrying out any procedure on a body, 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.

Precautions include:

- Avoid unnecessary manipulation of the body that may expel air from the lungs
- Wear appropriate PPE while handling the body at all times
- Perform hand hygiene before and after contact with the body
- Perform regular environmental disinfection, 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).

Instructions for cleaners on the preparation of disinfectant products is available in the information on environmental cleaning and disinfection principles for health and residential care facilities, available at <https://health.govcms.gov.au/resources/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-environmental-cleaning-and-disinfection-principles-for-health-and-residential-care-facilities>

Any person having contact with the body of a person suspected of having, or confirmed to have COVID-19, must wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). This includes:

- Water resistant protective outer garment such as a gown
- Disposable gloves
- Surgical mask
- Appropriate eye protection

After use, PPE should be carefully removed and placed in a clean water-soluble bag and laundered as soon as possible. Alternatively, it can be placed in a clean plastic bag and disposed of as general waste, although PPE heavily contaminated with body fluids of the deceased should be disposed of as clinical waste.

Aerosol generating procedures

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.

Transportation

There are no special requirements for transporting deceased bodies other than those required in the relevant State and Territory regulations. When transporting the deceased, the body must be placed and secured in a leak-proof body bag to prevent leakage of body fluids. The driver of the transportation vehicle must be informed that the body is confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19.

Embalming of bodies

It is not clear whether embalming is safe to do on people who have died from, or with, COVID-19. Embalming is not recommended for bodies who died from, or with, COVID-19.

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.

Advice for religious or ceremonial preparation and funeral practices

Any funeral practices in which members of the family or members of the community, who are not certified employees of the funeral service; closely handle the deceased, wash and / or wrap the deceased, or conduct any practices which involve purging the stomach contents of the deceased; are not recommended.

Funeral director must ensure persons who closely handle the deceased, wash and / or wrap the deceased, or conduct any practices which involve purging the stomach contents of the deceased are instructed on how to wear, use and remove appropriate PPE by a person trained in their use; and are supervised by a trained person during use. Funeral directors should also inform such persons to:

- Avoid direct contact with body fluids and mucous membranes of the deceased.
- If purging stomach contents must be conducted:
 - Wear a disposable waterproof apron or gown, goggles, surgical mask and disposable impermeable gloves during the washing procedure

- Wear waterproof shoes that can be disinfected (e.g. gumboots) or disposed of.
- Change gloves after the expulsion of stomach contents and washing the body with water
- After the final wash, wipe the outside of the body with a TGA listed disinfectant with claims of activity against enveloped viruses
- After placing the body in the coffin, wipe the outside of the coffin with diluted bleach and allow to air dry
- Place the body in a leak-proof body bag to prevent leakage of body fluids before wrapping the body. Wrap the body as normal, over the body bag.
- Remove PPE immediately after handling the body and place it in a clean plastic bag.

After use, PPE should be carefully removed. PPE heavily contaminated with body fluids of the deceased should be placed in a clean plastic bag and disposed of as clinical waste. Alternatively, it can be placed in a clean water-soluble bag and laundered as soon as possible.

Persons who closely handle the deceased, wash and / or wrap the deceased, or conduct any practices which involve purging the stomach contents of the deceased must wash their hands with liquid soap and water immediately after removing PPE. Clothing worn during any washing procedure should be removed before leaving the facility and placed in a clean water-soluble plastic bag, tied closed, and laundered as soon as possible.

Cremation of bodies

Funeral directors must comply with the relevant State or Territory legislation with regards to disposal of bodies. There is no evidence of an increased risk of transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19 during routine body handling and cremation. The infection control precautions described above should be used when handling any deceased bodies.

Explanting 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.

Body viewing

The bereaved should be allowed to view the body, however they should be advised not to touch the deceased. If the bereaved inadvertently touch the body, they should wash their hands immediately afterwards or use an alcohol-based hand rub.

Advice on body viewing in mortuary and forensic pathology settings

The next of kin, or other authorised persons, should be allowed to view the body without separation with a physical barrier, such as a screen or glass window. Such persons should be advised not to touch the deceased, however if this does occur they should wash their hands immediately afterwards or use an alcohol-based hand rub.

Anyone who has had close contact with a person with confirmed COVID-19, or who has been diagnosed with COVID-19, should follow public health advice about quarantine or isolation and should not attend the mortuary.

How can we help prevent the spread of COVID-19 at a funeral?

Like any public gathering, there is potential for transmission viruses between those attending a funeral, and consideration should be given those who are, or a likely to have been, contacts of patients with COVID-19. Funeral directors should consider delaying the service so that family members or critical attendees who require quarantine or isolation for COVID-19 can attend.

To minimise transmission of COVID-19, the funeral director must comply with Australian Government and state or territory public health direction on public gatherings, and should consider the type and size of the gathering. For example, attendance may be restricted to close family and friends, the gathering may be held in an open-air venue instead of an enclosed space, or alternative ways to conduct services may be considered such as via video link. For more information read our information on [public gatherings](#).

Practising good hand and respiratory hygiene is the best defence against most viruses, including the virus that causes COVID-19. Funeral directors should encourage and facilitate all attendees at a service to:

- wash hands frequently with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub before and after eating, and after going to the toilet
- practise good respiratory hygiene and cover coughs and sneezes with their elbow or a disposable tissue, dispose of tissues, and use alcohol-based hand rub immediately
- avoid physical contact with others (stay more than 1.5 metres from people, avoid hugging and kissing)
- if unwell*, stay at home or, if attending the service is essential, do so for as short a time as possible and stay more than 1.5 metres from others

***Note:** this advice applies to people generally. Anyone who has had close contact with a person with confirmed COVID-19, or who has been diagnosed with COVID-19, should follow public health advice about testing and self-quarantine or isolation.

Venues where funerals have been held should be cleaned in accordance with the guidance on routine environmental cleaning and disinfection in the community, available at <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-information-about-routine-environmental-cleaning-and-disinfection-in-the-community>

More information

For the latest advice, information and resources, go to www.health.gov.au

Call the National Coronavirus Health Information Line on 1800 020 080. It operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you require translating or interpreting services, call 131 450.

The phone number of your state or territory public health agency is available at www.health.gov.au/state-territory-contacts

If you have concerns about your health, speak to your doctor.

While coronavirus is of concern, it is important to remember that most people displaying symptoms such as fever, cough, sore throat or tiredness are likely suffering with a cold or other respiratory illness — not coronavirus.