



19 November 2020

Infection Control Expert Group Advice for funeral directors

The Infection Control Expert Group (ICEG) developed this advice and the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee endorsed it. It provides guidance on infection prevention and control (IPC), including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) for funeral workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For extra guidance on IPC during the COVID-19 pandemic, see the Department of Health [website](#).

This document provides national advice and is a minimum standard for guidance on PPE, which is updated as the situation changes. Check with your state or territory health department for specific advice for your location.

For up to date case definitions and testing criteria see the Communicable Diseases Network Australia National Guidelines for Public Health Units.

Handling of deceased bodies

There is no evidence to suggest that COVID-19 is transferrable from the bodies of those suspected of having, or confirmed to have, died from COVID-19 to funeral industry staff.

It's important that funeral industry staff use routine body handling and infection control precautions when handling deceased bodies. Handling of bodies, including transport and disposal, should occur in line with the relevant legislation.

The greatest risk of transmission to funeral industry staff is likely to be through contact with family and friends of the deceased. For more information on stopping the spread of COVID-19, visit the Department of Health's [website](#).

Infection control procedures and personal protective equipment

Funeral industry staff should follow standard infection control and occupational health and safety guidelines at all times. With any procedure on a deceased body, a person must comply with Part 3 of the [Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Infection in Healthcare \(2019\)](#).

Precautions include:

- Avoid unnecessary handling of the deceased body that may expel air from the lungs
- Wear appropriate PPE while handling the deceased body
- Perform hand hygiene before and after contact with the deceased body
- Clean all surfaces and equipment regularly. This includes using a specific disinfectant listed in the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods with a virucidal claim (kills viruses).

Instructions on environmental cleaning and disinfection principles for health and residential care facilities is available on the Department of Health's [website](#).

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

- Water resistant protective outer garment such as a gown
- Disposable gloves¹
- Surgical mask
- Appropriate eye protection

After use, carefully remove PPE and place in a clean water-soluble bag and launder as soon as possible. Or, place in a clean plastic bag and disposed of as general waste. PPE heavily contaminated with body fluids of the deceased is best disposed of as clinical waste.

Aerosol generating procedures

Avoid aerosol generating procedures where possible. Use airborne precautions² when performing aerosol generating procedures. These include post mortem use of fast-spinning power tools.

Transportation

There is not a specific requirement for transporting deceased bodies other than those required in the relevant state and territory regulations. To transport the body, secure in a leak-proof body bag to prevent leakage of body fluids. Inform the driver of the transport vehicle that the body is positive for, or suspected to have COVID-19.

Embalming of deceased bodies

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

If embalming is necessary, use an embalmer certified and trained in the use of PPE consistent with contact and airborne precautions. This includes a P2/N95 mask which has been fit-checked, gown, gloves and eye protection.

Advice for religious or ceremonial preparation and funeral practices

The recommendation is that members of family or the community should:

- avoid touching the deceased;
- avoid washing and / or wrapping the deceased; and
- avoid conducting any practices which involve purging the stomach contents of the deceased.

Funeral directors must ensure people who closely handle the deceased, wash and / or wrap the deceased, or conduct any practices which involve purging the stomach contents of the deceased:

¹ Vinyl gloves are not recommended for the handling of deceased bodies in the context of COVID-19. Powder-free latex or nitrile gloves are accepted as superior in clinical care and are less likely to be breached compared with vinyl gloves. Gloves should be selected and worn in line with the [Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Infection in Healthcare \(2019\)](#).

² See the [Safety and Quality website](#).

- are provided training on how to wear, use and remove appropriate PPE by a person trained in their use; and
- have supervision 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 are applicable:
 - 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 (for example 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 straight after handling the body and place it in a clean plastic bag.

After use, remove PPE carefully. Put PPE heavily contaminated with body fluids of the deceased in a clean plastic bag and dispose of as clinical waste. Or, place in a clean water-soluble bag and launder as soon as possible.

Persons who handle the deceased by:

- washing and / or wrapping the deceased; or
- conducting any practices which involve purging the stomach contents of the deceased

Must wash their hands with liquid soap and water straight after removing PPE. Remove clothing worn during any washing procedure before leaving the facility. Place clothing in a clean water-soluble plastic bag, tied closed, and launder as soon as possible.

Cremation of bodies

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

Avoid explanting medical devices for deceased bodies who died from, or with, COVID-19 as it is not clear whether it is safe to do. Manage cremation practices accordingly.

Body viewing

The bereaved can view the body, however they are not to touch the deceased. If the bereaved accidentally touches the body, they should wash their hands straight 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, can view the body without separation with a physical barrier, such as a screen or glass window. Such persons are to avoid touching the deceased. However if this does occur they should wash their hands straight afterwards or use an alcohol-based hand rub.

Anyone who has had close contact with a person with confirmed COVID-19, or who tested positive 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. Consider those who are, or are 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 need 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. The type and size of the gathering should be considered. For example, restrict attendance to close family and friends, provide an option to gather in an open-air venue, or alternative ways to conduct services. This can be through a 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 help all attendees at a service to:

- wash hands often 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 which includes covering coughs and sneezes with their elbow or a disposable tissue. Dispose of tissues, and use alcohol-based hand rub straight after
- 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 tested positive with COVID-19, should follow public health advice.

Funeral venues are to be cleaned according to the guidance on routine environmental cleaning and disinfection in the community, available on the [webpage](#).

More information

For the latest advice, information and resources, go to the [Department of Health website](#).

Call the National COVID-19 Health Information Line on 1800 020 080. It operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you need translating or interpreting services, call 131 450.

The phone number of your state or territory public health agency is available on the Department of Health [website](#).

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