



COVID-19

National Interim Guidelines for Funeral Directors on managing infection risks when handling deceased individuals with confirmed COVID-19

This interim guidance is based on what is currently known about COVID 19. It is intended for use during a high containment phase, when only a limited number of cases have been identified in Ireland. AS this is a rapidly evolving situation the guidance may change

This guidance should be read in conjunction with the guidelines for the management of deceased individuals harboring infectious disease 2013 available at www.hpsc.ie.

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Table of Contents

Risk of COVID-19 infection from deceased individuals	3
Risk of COVID-19 infection from contact with members of the public	3
General Preparation	4
Death in a healthcare setting	4
Coroner	4
Communication of level or risk.....	4
Embalming	4
Hygienic preparation	4
Transport to the Mortuary	5
Transfer to the Funeral Home	5
Cremation	7
Arranging the funeral for an individual with laboratory confirmed COVID-19 infection.....	6
Funeral service.....	6
Environmental Hygiene	7

Risk of COVID-19 infection from deceased individuals

The virus that causes COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) can spread from person to person through droplets from the nose or mouth of a person infected with the virus. These droplets are produced when a person coughs or sneezes.

People can catch the virus either directly when an infected individual coughs or sneezes and the droplets they produce fall onto the mucous membranes of another person or indirectly when a person touches an object or surfaces that an infected person has contaminated and then touches their eyes, nose or mouth. It is also possible that the act of moving a recently deceased individual might be sufficient to expel a very small amount of air and viral droplets from the lungs and thereby present a minor risk. If a person can maintain a distance of 1 metre from someone with COVID-19 infection then they are not within the likely range of droplet transmission.

After death, the human body does not generally create a serious health hazard for COVID-19 infection.

In the interests of infection control, all staff should use Standard Precautions as a matter of course, treating all human remains as though potentially infected.

Risk of COVID-19 infection from contact with members of the public

Hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene are a series of actions to take which are designed to reduce the spread of respiratory infections to yourself and others.

These actions include

- Regular handwashing
- Covering your mouth and nose with a tissue or the bend of your elbow when you cough or sneeze.
- Social distancing which means keeping at least one metre away from others in a social setting.

In line with Government guidance people with respiratory illness including those who have known or suspected COVID-19 are being asked to avoid public gatherings including funeral services.

Refer to Department of Health website for up-to-date information on restriction of mass gatherings as this may be subject to change.

It is possible that close contacts of the deceased may have been exposed to COVID-19 infection through their interaction with the individual. Where possible interactions with family members should be limited. Practical approaches to achieve this include;

- Physically separating yourself by at least one metre from members of the public
- Avoiding handshaking
- Asking family to designate a single point of contact, this person should where possible should not have been in close contact with the deceased
- Carry out conversations/provide instruction by telephone where possible

General Preparation

These guidelines are not intended to cover every situation or event however the general principles contained within this document, can be used as a framework to guide local funeral directors to review their own pathways and practices.

Where possible hand sanitisers for use by the public should be provided at funeral homes and other venues

Tissues and a safe method for their disposal should be provided at funeral homes and other venues

Display relevant COVID-19 posters in the staff and public areas of your premises. Posters are available on www.hpsc.ie

Death in a healthcare setting

Coroner

Refer to statement from the Coroners Society of Ireland version1. Dated 11/03/2020

Communication of level or risk

- As COVID-19 is a new and emerging pathogen it is understandable that those who will be handling the remains will be concerned and may wish to be made aware of the patients infectious status.

Embalming

- Embalming is not recommended unless there are appropriate controls to manage aerosol generating procedures. Further details in relation to aerosol generating procedures are available in the national guidelines for infection prevention and control in acute healthcare on www.hpsc.ie

Hygienic preparation

- Any infection control procedures that have been advised before death must be continued in handling the deceased person after death
- Hygienic preparation includes washing of the face and hands, closing the mouth and eyes, tidying the hair and in some cases shaving the face.
- Washing or preparing the body is acceptable if those carrying out the task wear long-sleeved gowns gloves , a surgical mask and eye protection if there is a risk of splashing)which should then be discarded.

Transport to the Mortuary

- Bodies should be placed in a body bag prior to transportation to the mortuary as this facilitates lifting and further reduces the risk of infection.
- A face mask or similar should be placed over the mouth of the deceased before lifting the remains into the body bag.
- Those physically handling the body and placing the body into the bag should wear, at a minimum, the following PPE:
 - Gloves
 - Long sleeved gown
 - Surgical facemask
- Pay close attention to washing hands after removal of PPE
- Once in the hospital mortuary, it would be acceptable to open the body bag for family viewing only (the mortuary attendant should wear PPE to open the bag as above)
- The family should be advised not to kiss the deceased and should clean their hands with alcohol hand rub or soap and water after touching the deceased

PPE is not required for transfer once the body has been placed in the coffin

Waking in the domicillary setting

- In the current situation waking in the domicillary setting is not advised.

Transfer to the Funeral Home

- Where transfer to a funeral home occurs the deceased should be removed to a designated area within the funeral directors' facilities
- There is unlikely to be any significant contamination of the removal vehicle as the remains are contained within the coffin. Removal vehicles should be cleaned as usual after the removal of the remains.
- In the current situation it is likely that only a few key people close to the deceased will attend the funeral home.
- In exceptional circumstances where family members have not had the opportunity to view the remains in the hospital mortuary the coffin can be opened. Staff must wear appropriate PPE to open the bag and fold it back leaving head, shoulders and arms exposed.
- The family should be advised not to kiss the deceased and should clean their hands with alcohol hand rub or soap and water if they touch the deceased.

Arranging the funeral for an individual with laboratory confirmed COVID-19 infection.

- The funeral director should avoid direct contact with any family member who has been identified by Public Health as being a close contact, they can establish this by telephone before meeting individual family members.
- The deceased should be brought from the healthcare facility to the designated funeral home or the location where the service will be held e.g. church.
- The coffin should remain closed.
- In the context of COVID-19, the current recommendation is that if required only a small number of people should attend the funeral home to pay their respects

Funeral service

Scenario 1: If the family members and friends **are not close contacts** (as defined by Public Health) then they may attend and the funeral can proceed as usual however the coffin should remain closed and sealed.

Scenario 2: If family members/friends have been informed that **they are close contacts** by public health and they wish to attend a service. The arrangements and feasibility of this should be discussed with the family and service providers sensitively beforehand

- They should be advised to use their own private transport to travel to and from the venue and to avoid contact with people other than members of their own household.
- The funeral should be private and limited to those that the family identify as essential.
- Social distancing of at least 1m between identified groups should be recommended for everyone but particularly the following groups
 - close contacts who are symptomatic
 - close contacts who are asymptomatic
 - those who are not close contacts

Those attending should be aware of the importance of regular hand hygiene and good cough etiquette. Direct contact between groups is not advised.

It is a sensible measure to suspend the use of condolence books and recommend people issue condolences through social media, online websites such as rip.ie, text or by letter

Where possible, close contacts and relatives of the deceased should use their own transport for attendance at the funeral.

The family should be advised that they may have a Memorial Service at a later date.

Cremation

- The option of cremation is at the discretion of the family but is not required for the purposes of infection prevention and control.

Environmental Hygiene

- We know that viruses similar to COVID-19 are transferred to and by people's hands. Therefore, regular hand hygiene and cleaning of frequently touched surfaces will help to reduce the risk of infection.
- In areas open to the public, routine cleaning of premises is sufficient but particular attention should be given to frequently touched surfaces including toilets, door handles/panels on doors, telephones and chairs.
- Public areas where a symptomatic individual has passed through and spent minimal time in (such as corridors) do not need to be specially cleaned.