



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. 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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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

After death, the human body does not generally create a serious health hazard for COVID-19 infection. There is no evidence so far of transmission of SARS-CoV2 through the handling of bodies of deceased persons.

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

- Frequent 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 two metres away from others in a social setting.

In line with Government guidance individuals are being asked to avoid public gatherings including funeral services.

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 two metres from members of the public
- Avoiding shaking hands with others
- Asking the family to designate a single point of contact. This person should, where possible, 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 from the [Department of Health website](#).

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

- Consensus opinion is that embalming is not recommended for those with confirmed COVID-19 infection at this time however it is acknowledged that this recommendation is different in other jurisdictions.

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, including for religious reasons, is acceptable if those carrying out the task wear an apron or long sleeved gown, gloves, a surgical face mask and eye protection (if there is a risk of splashing). Hand hygiene should be performed once this personal protective equipment is removed.

Transport

- An inner lining(body bag) is not required in terms of COVID-19 risk but if available may be used for other practical reasons such as preventing leakage affecting the mortuary environment
- A face mask or similar should be placed over the mouth of the deceased before lifting the remains into the inner lining

- Those physically handling the body and placing the body into the inner lining or coffin should wear, at a minimum, the following PPE:
 - Gloves
 - Long sleeved gown
 - Surgical facemask
- Pay close attention to washing hands after removing PPE
- 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.
- If there are very exceptional circumstances in which a funeral director forms a judgement that it is necessary and appropriate to open the coffin in the funeral home and view the remains, this can be done with minimal risk with adherence to the following precautions:
 - Staff must wear appropriate PPE to open an inner lining (when used) 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 do touch the deceased

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

Funeral Service for person with confirmed COVID-19 infection

In arranging the funeral for an individual with 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.
- In light of current restriction on mass gatherings and the requirement for physical distancing, public reposals and gatherings at funeral homes should be discouraged.
The funeral should be private and limited to a maximum of ten people as advised by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET).
Only the following should attend:
 - members of the person's household
 - close family members
 - close friends if the deceased has no household or family members
- Mourners should follow the advice on social distancing when travelling to and from the funeral gathering.
- Social distancing of at least 2m between identified groups should be recommended for everyone.
- Physical interactions including shaking hands and hugging should be avoided.
- Arrangements should not be advertised in papers and online (The funeral notice can be placed but the arrangements should not appear).
- Families can advise relatives privately of the funeral arrangements. See below for suggested wording:

- *A private funeral will take place due to government advice regarding public gatherings. Those who would have liked to attend the funeral, but due to current restrictions cannot, please leave a personal message in the section below 'Condolences'.*
- In the papers, a similar message can be written with reference to www.rip.ie or your company website to offer the family condolences.
- 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.
- The family should be advised that they may have a Memorial Service at a later date.
- Where possible, close contacts and relatives of the deceased should use their own transport for attendance at the funeral.

Cremation & Burial

- The option of cremation is at the discretion of the family but is not required for the purposes of infection prevention and control.
- Removal of Permanent Pacemakers prior to cremation is not considered an aerosol generating procedure (as long as no high speed devices are used).
- Burial of bodies in shrouds is permitted, those handling the deceased should perform hand hygiene afterwards.

Environmental Hygiene in a Funeral Home

- 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.