

Ministry of Health

COVID-19 Guidance: Funeral and Bereavement Services

Version 1 – March 29, 2020

This guidance document provides basic information only. It is not intended to take the place of medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment.

Please check the [Ministry of Health \(MOH\) COVID-19 website](#) regularly for updates to this document, case definition, FAQs, and other information.

Please refer to the Bereavement Authority of Ontario's (BAO) [current guidance](#) for updated information.

Essential Service

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Ontario announced the shutdown of all non-essential services across the province. The Government of Ontario has deemed businesses providing funeral, mortician, cremation, transfer, and burial services, and any related goods and products (such as coffins and embalming fluid) to be [essential services](#) that are eligible to remain open.

Risk to Mortuary Personnel

The risk of transmission of COVID-19 from handling the body of a deceased person is low but staff should take extra precaution in employing infection prevention and control (IPAC) measures when handling bodies, in accordance with professional best practices, the guidance of the BAO and the Funeral Service Association Canada of Canada (FSAC).

For additional guidance, please refer to the [Bereavement Authority of Ontario's Routine Practices in the Bereavement Care Setting](#) (PDF 1.53MB) and [COVID 19 guidance to funeral professionals](#).

Transportation of Bodies

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

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

Receiving/Handling of Bodies with COVID-19

Before accepting deceased persons with COVID-19, funeral directors should review their IPAC policies and procedures to familiarize staff with these practices, with focus on donning/doffing personal protective equipment (PPE).

Persons who may handle deceased persons with COVID-19, such as funeral directors and morgue attendants, should maintain standard IPAC procedures consistent with the best practices outlined by the BAO.

Precautions while handling the body include, but are not limited to:

- Preparing the work area prior to commencing procedures reduces the potential for contamination of other equipment or surfaces.
 - Identify and place the instruments and supplies required for the entire procedure in a readily accessible area; and,
 - Ensure all instruments and supplies are disposable or cleaned and disinfected immediately following the procedure;
- Avoiding unnecessary manipulation of the body that may expel air from the lungs;
- Wearing appropriate PPE while handling the body at all times;
- Practicing proper hand hygiene before and after contact with the body; and,
- Performing regular environmental decontamination, including cleaning and disinfecting all surfaces and equipment.

Storage of Bodies

COVID-19 is a new disease and we are still learning how it spreads. There is insufficient evidence to determine how long COVID-19 droplets stay on a body so unnecessary contact should be minimised. Those in direct contact with deceased cases of COVID-19 (both suspected or confirmed) should be protected from exposure to infected bodily fluids, contaminated objects, or other contaminated environmental surfaces through the wearing of appropriate PPE.

During standard handling, the risk associated with transmission of droplets or aerosol from the airways of the deceased is considered low. Conversely, aerosol-generating procedures or procedures that can lead to splashes during post-mortem examinations carry a higher risk and require appropriate PPE.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

In addition to the guidance provided by the BAO, Public Health Ontario (PHO) has developed video resources on proper practice for donning/doffing PPE:

1. [Putting on Full Personal Protective Equipment](#) (video)
2. [Taking off Full Personal Protective Equipment](#) (video)

Standard IPAC and occupational health and safety guidelines should also be followed at all times while handling and preparing a body. Persons in close contact with the body must wear:

1. **Gloves:** Gloves need to be used in all cases when transporting remains. Gloves should be removed after the remains are transferred to the stretcher and hand hygiene performed before further transport of the deceased. Situations such as decomposition may demand the use of heavy-duty gloves rather than regular disposable gloves due to an increased risk of gloves tearing or exposure to a high concentration of bodily fluids.
2. **Face Protection:** Face protection should be worn whenever there is a risk that body fluids may splash onto the face (e.g. face shield, goggles, face mask).

3. **Gown:** A gown should be worn whenever there is a risk that body fluids may come into contact with the clothes or skin.
4. **Shoe Covers:** Shoe covers or rubber boots should be worn when needed to protect footwear from body fluids. After use, PPE should be carefully removed and decontaminated or disposed of as clinical waste as soon as practicable.

Standard IPAC and occupational health and safety guidelines should also be followed at all times while within two metres of individuals who were contacts of the person who died of COVID 19 (e.g., family or community members who were close contacts of the deceased).

Body Bags

The body of a deceased person suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 should be transported and stored in a leak-proof body bag, which should be clearly and permanently labelled as containing COVID 19, such as: "**Infectious Risk – Handle with care**". A disinfectant should be applied to the outside of the bag after the deceased individual is transferred into a body bag.

Used body bags should be disposed of in accordance with requirements for biomedical waste in the *Environmental Protection Act* and the *Dangerous Goods Transportation Act*.

Embalming

A deceased patient suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19 can be embalmed. While embalming aids in preservation and disinfection, the procedure does not completely eradicate microorganisms.

The potential for exposure to infection continues to be a risk even if the deceased remains have been embalmed. Personal protective equipment must be worn and standard IPAC and occupational health and safety guidelines should be followed at all times while handling and preparing the body.

Cremation or Hydrolyzation

A deceased patient suspected or known to have COVID-19 can be cremated or hydrolyzed. Mortuary staff should:

- Institute appropriate administrative controls (e.g., proper staff education/training);
- Perform a risk assessment (e.g., the continued risk at various stages of decomposition – while decomposition increases the risk of exposure to body fluids, time also reduces the virus' viability);
- Perform proper hand hygiene;
- Wear PPE; and,
- Institute effective environmental controls (e.g., appropriate air ventilation, stringent disinfection/cleaning, stringent waste management procedures).

Viewing the Body

For updated information relating to viewing the body and funeral protocol, please refer to [BAO's current guidance](#).

The Registrar of the BAO issued a compulsory directive (March 23, 2020) regarding funeral protocols. All funerals now, must be limited to the maximum number of people that can be accommodated, while always maintaining two metres (six feet) of separation.

Other activities, such as kissing, washing, and shrouding should be avoided before, during, and after the body has been prepared, if possible. If contact with the body is important due to religious or cultural practices, families are encouraged to work with their community cultural and religious leaders and funeral home staff on how to reduce their exposure as much as possible. If contact cannot be avoided, family or community members should, at minimum, wear disposable gloves disposed in a no-touch waste receptacle and perform appropriate hand hygiene. Additional PPE should be recommended based on the activity to be performed.

When the family leaves, thoroughly clean the funeral home, paying special attention to high touch surfaces the family may have come in contact with during their visit.

Handling the Body at the Cemetery

For updated information relating to handling the body at the cemetery, please refer to BAO's [current guidance](#).

Handling of the deceased at the cemetery refers to bereavement care personnel having contact with casketed remains during interments. In addition to mortuary staff, appropriate IPAC and occupational health and safety requirements should be followed by all interment staff.

These include:

- Policies need to be established that address the extent or limits of the involvement grounds personnel have with casketed remains;
- Appropriate education of grounds personnel managing the interment;
- Using proper hand hygiene and PPE when interring the body, to limit exposure;
- Stringent cleaning of all tools and equipment exposed to contamination during the interment process;
- Use approved receptacles for the disposal of contaminated waste, including PPE and cleaning supplies.

Additional Considerations

In jurisdictions where a timely burial, cremation, or hydrolyzation are not possible because of frozen ground, lack of facilities, or insufficient capacity, remains may need to be stored temporarily.

Temporary morgues or vault space may need to be arranged according to local availability and requirements. The resource needs (e.g. body bags) and supply management for temporary morgues and vault space should also be addressed. The types of temporary cold storage to be considered may include refrigerated trucks, cold storage lockers or hockey arenas.

Additional Resources

- [Bereavement Authority of Ontario's COVID-19 Updates](#)
- [Bereavement Authority of Ontario's Routine Practices in the Bereavement Care Setting](#) (PDF 1.53MB)
- [The Funeral Service Association of Canada \(FSAC\) COVID 19 Updates](#)

Additional Contact Information

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