

# Care of the deceased with suspected or confirmed COVID-19

26 May 2020



## Introduction

This guidance has been developed to support the safe and respectful handling of bodies, suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19, irrespective of cause of death.

These recommended measures may mean that not all religious and cultural traditions can be followed. Whilst this may be distressing, these measures are critical for protecting workers, religious leaders, families, and the broader community from exposure to the COVID-19 virus.

This guidance should be provided and explained to religious leaders and organizations, next of kin, and other affected community members to ensure that these measures are understood, accepted, and implemented. It is recommended countries engage with religious and community leaders in advance to discuss how to ensure that funerals can be respectful to cultural consideration, whilst also incorporating these new measures for everyone's safety.

## Required training

Any person who is not trained in the use of standard precautions and PPE must not touch the body. This includes healthcare workers, family, mourners, and religious leaders.

## Handling bodies of the deceased

Anyone involved in handling the body of a deceased person with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 should always use routine body-handling and infection prevention and control precautions, except where this document instructs otherwise.

- Before any contact with the deceased, ensure availability of supplies for hand hygiene and PPE.
- All family members are advised not to directly interact with the dead body.
- Handwash with soap and water or use an alcohol based hand rub for 20 seconds after viewing the body.

## Infection prevention and control for mortuaries

- Provision of a hand sink for washing hands and supplies must be made available and accessible for the staff and family to use after viewing the deceased.

- Mortuary staff must be trained on PPE including putting on and removing PPE and using proper hand hygiene.
- The following PPE must be worn by anyone who has direct contact with the deceased:
  - face mask (surgical mask),
  - eye protection (for example, safety glasses/goggles or face shield,
  - long-sleeved gown that is fluid resistant, and
  - gloves (non-sterile).
- Safely remove and dispose of PPE appropriately in a bin, with the assistance of a buddy.
- Always adhere to physical distancing of one to two metres.

### Care of body immediately after death

As quickly as possible:

- the doctor should complete the death certificate,
- the body should be prepared, and
- the next of kind should be notified

Mourners must not touch or kiss the body.

### Belongings of deceased

Before returning to the next of kin:

- Non-clothing items should be handled with gloves and cleaned with neutral detergent followed by disinfectant of at least 70% ethanol alcohol or 0.1% (1000 ppm) bleach before returning them to the next of kin.
- Clothing items should be handled with gloves and bagged. The outside of the bag should be wiped with 70% ethanol alcohol or 0.1% (1000 ppm) bleach before returning to next of kin.

The next of kin should be advised to:

- Use gloves and practice strict hand hygiene when handling the bag containing personal belongings.
- Handle clothing items with gloved hands and machine wash clothing with warm water and laundry detergent at 60–90°C (140–194°F).
- If machine washing is not possible, clothes can be soaked in hot water and soap in a large drum or pot using a stick to stir and being careful to avoid splashing.
- The drum should then be emptied, and the linens soaked in 0.5% bleach for approximately 30 minutes.
- Finally, the laundry should be rinsed with clean water and the clothes allowed to dry fully in sunlight.

### Preparation of the body

Use the same level of infection prevention and control precautions to manage a deceased person as before their death.

- If extubation is required, and there is a risk of generating aerosols, use a P2/N95 respirator mask as well as a long-sleeved gown, gloves, and eye protection.
- Remove of all lines, catheters and other tubes including ensuring oral and nasal orifices of the dead body are covered and or packed to prevent leakage of body fluids.
- Store the body of a deceased person with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 in a leak resistant body bag if available and clearly label as containing COVID-19, such as 'Risk of COVID-19 – Handle with care'. If no body bag is available, wrap body in a sheet or cloth and attach label.
- Ensure all documentation is complete and attached to the exterior of the body bag.
- Conduct identification checks at the time of body preparation as the body bag or cloth must not be re-opened once the body is inside.
- Perform environmental decontamination as per routine cleaning and disinfection processes, including the trolley used to transport body to the mortuary.

## Mortuary care

A separate morgue is not required. However:

- A dedicated area should be allocated within the mortuary refrigerator for COVID-19 bodies.
- The area dedicated for COVID can be separated with the use of tape or rope and clearly marked for COVID-19.
- Where possible, mortuaries should have procedural arrangements to segregate clean and dirty areas.
- Mortuary staff when preparing the body for placement into the coffin/casket must wear PPE.
- Family viewing should be arranged, and allowance should be made for only a few members to view the body only. No touching or kissing of the body should be allowed. Families should use standard precautions during and after viewing, including hand hygiene with either hand washing or hand sanitizer.
- People with respiratory symptoms should not participate in viewing the body, or if necessary, wear a medical mask to prevent contamination of the environment and further transmission of the disease to others.
- Decontaminate the casket with sodium hypochlorite (bleach) before issuing to family for burial.

## Environmental cleaning of the mortuary

The SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19 has been detected in aerosols for up to three hours; on copper for up to four hours; on cardboard for up to 24 hours; and days on plastic and stainless steel for up to three days(1). However, cleaning with a neutral detergent followed by disinfectant agent can effectively inactivate the virus.

Mortuaries and other places where bodies are managed should follow these steps for environmental cleaning for mortuaries and other places where bodies are managed. Conduct regular cleaning of the physical environment using a 2-step system:

1. Clean with soap and water, allow to dry.

2. After drying, disinfect the surface or objects with disinfectant concentration of 0.1% (1000 ppm) sodium hypochlorite (bleach), allow to dry.

Wipe all surfaces. Do not use compressed air and/or water under pressure for cleaning, or any other methods that can cause splashing or might re-aerosolize infectious material.

Environmental surfaces, where the body was prepared, should be cleaned immediately afterwards.

### Instructions to family on burial

Families should follow all guidance provided by health authorities on handling the body of the deceased. The following safety instructions should be provided to family members, religious and community leaders, and any other relevant parties:

- Funerals should be closed casket.
- No touching or kissing of the body.
- Funerals should be held on the same day the body is collected from the mortuary and ideally funeral services held at burial or cremation center.
- If funerals are allowed, then additional measures should be taken to reduce transmission for mourners at the gathering:
  - Ensure a physical distance of one to two meters between mourners is always maintained. Seating and space should be set up to accommodate this.
  - No shaking of hands, hugging or kissing between mourners should be allowed.
  - If possible, the gathering should be held in a well-ventilated space, like an open house or with windows left open.
- Burial attendants or funeral pallbearers must wear gloves and wash hands with soap and water after removal of the gloves following the burial.
- Pay attention to protect children, persons with existing medical conditions and elderly persons in attendance.

## References

1. Van Doremalen N, Bushmaker T, Morris DH, Holbrook MG, Gamble A, Williamson BN et al. Aerosol and Surface Stability of SARS-CoV-2 as Compared with SARS-CoV-1. N Engl J Med. 2020;382(16). Available from: <https://www.nejm.org/doi/pdf/10.1056/NEJMc2004973>
2. Infection Prevention and Control for the safe management of a dead body in the context of COVID-19 Geneva: World Health Organization; 24 March 2020. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/331538> License: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO (accessed 14 May 2020).

*This document has been developed in accordance with global guidance and contextualized to the Pacific context by Pacific Community the from the COVID-19 Pacific Joint Incident Management Team.*



Pacific  
Community  
Communauté  
du Pacifique



World Health  
Organization

Representative Office  
for the South Pacific