

# COVID-19 Public Health Recommendations for Handling of Deceased Persons

This document provides advice and recommendations for the handling of deceased persons in various settings, including funeral services professionals, non-professionals handling deceased persons, and operators of non-AHS and AHS care facilities. Site specific policies may also apply. The document will include information on the following topics:

1. COVID-19 classification in the Bodies of Deceased Persons Regulation under the Public Health Act of Alberta (references).
2. Routine practices and personal protective equipment.
3. COVID-19 labelling requirements.
4. Testing for COVID-19 in decedents.
5. Procedures for cleaning and handling patient belongings after probable/confirmed a COVID-19 death.
6. Funeral services restrictions.
7. Handling of deceased persons by non-licensed individuals.
8. Definitions

For general information on COVID-19 please visit: <https://www.alberta.ca/coronavirus-info-for-albertans.aspx>.

## **1. COVID-19 classification in the Bodies of Deceased Persons Regulation under the Public Health Act of Alberta (references).**

COVID-19 is considered a schedule 3 disease under the Bodies of Deceased Persons Regulation, which requires routine practices. Schedule 3 practices include the requirement to place the body in an impervious body bag as soon as practically possible after death. This generally means hospital or facility staff are responsible. With a death in the community, this may mean a funeral services professional. Double bagging is not required. At this time, there are no restrictions on transportation, embalming, or disposition services provided by funeral homes, crematoriums, or cemeteries in Alberta. If embalming is conducted, production of splash or aerosols should be minimized when possible, and appropriate PPE must be available.

Non-AHS facilities who are unable to procure body bags through their usual suppliers may request body bags through the government of Alberta's online form at: <https://ppe.sp.alberta.ca/Lists/Requests/New.aspx?IsDlg=1>.

## **2. Routine practices and personal protective equipment.**

The following guidance applies to the handling of deceased persons in AHS and non-AHS facilities.

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Minimum Routine Practices include:

- Proper hand hygiene before and after touching the decedent.
- Use of suitable disinfectant products (common disinfectants with a DIN and a virucidal claim) on all surfaces.
- Use of appropriate Personal Protective Equipment as per point of care risk assessment, including contact and droplet precautions.

Table 1. PPE for handling decedents during COVID-19.\*

PPE	Minimal Contact Procedures (E.g. public viewing involving touching of body, transporting in body bag)	High Contact Procedures (E.g. significant manual handling, undressing, preparation, moving without body bag)	Invasive Procedures (E.g. autopsy, embalming)
Disposable gloves (and hand hygiene)	√	√	√
Disposable plastic apron		√	√
Disposable gown		√	√
Fluid-resistant surgical mask		√	Non-aerosol generating procedures
N-95 face mask or equivalent			Aerosol generating procedures
Disposable eye protection (e.g. face shield)		√	√

\*Adapted from Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, Government of Alberta. (2020, March 30). Information for funeral homes: COVID-19. Retrieved from <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/a17a832e/files/uploaded/OCME-bulletin-funeral-homes%20%282020-03-30%29.pdf> and from World Health Organization. (2020, March 24). Infection Prevention and Control for the safe management of a dead body in the context of COVID-19.

**For more information, please contact your nearest Environmental Public Health office.**

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Retrieved from [https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331538/WHO-COVID-19-IPC\\_DBMgmt-2020.1-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331538/WHO-COVID-19-IPC_DBMgmt-2020.1-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

PPE supplies are provided via existing supply chain processes and site specific distribution within AHS sites.

Non-AHS facilities who are unable to procure PPE through their usual suppliers may request PPE through the government of Alberta's online form at:

<https://ppe.sp.alberta.ca/Lists/Requests/New.aspx?IsDIg=1>.

### 3. COVID-19 labelling requirements.

As COVID-19 is not a schedule 1 or 2 disease as defined by the Bodies of Deceased Persons Regulation, there is no need for bodies to be labeled as such. Routine practices, including the use of impervious body bags, provide sufficient protection.

### 4. Testing for COVID-19 in decedents.

Where preceding history and symptoms do not suggest COVID-19 then no swab should be taken. If clinical history is suggestive of a COVID-19 risk, a swab may be taken, especially if advice to close contacts may be needed. Swabs should be taken as early as possible but within 48 hours post mortem.

### 5. Procedures for handling patient belongings and cleaning spaces after a probable/confirmed COVID-19 death.

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The personal belongings of a deceased person with confirmed/probable COVID-19 do not require disposal. However, disposal of some non-valuables may be considered with familial/caregiver consent.

Ideally, facility staff should gather belongings from the room and then conduct all cleaning. Staff who are dealing with belongings or cleaning should be provided with appropriate PPE (minimum gloves).

For personal linens and textiles, staff should put items into sealed plastic bags, then clean and disinfect the outside of the bags before family pickup. If items need to be washed by site staff, they should be laundered as per routine practices generally taken for persons on isolation/additional precautions. This should include washing in warm/hot water, and drying in a hot mechanical drier. Soiled laundry should not be shaken out.

For hard surfaced items, items should be cleaned and disinfected (consult <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/ppih/if-ppih-covid-19-environmental-cleaning-public-facilities.pdf>).

Cleaned items should be removed from the room/laundry, put in clean bags, and sent home with family. Bags should be labelled to clarify whether the contents have been cleaned.

Instructions should be provided to families on how to deal with belongings that were not cleaned at the facility. This includes laundering and cleaning items as noted above. Any items that can't be cleaned appropriately (paper documents, card board-boxes, etc.) should be kept in the bag provided by the facility and stored for 10 days.

Once items are removed, the room should be fully cleaned and disinfected according to site specific policies.

## 6. Funeral services restrictions.

Funeral services businesses are classified as an essential service by the Government of Alberta and can remain open. However, current provincial restrictions for mass gathering apply to funeral services. Gatherings must be restricted to no more than 15 people. Providers must

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ensure that physical distancing guidelines are followed. Maintaining a distance of 2 meters between attendees can be encouraged through seating placement and signage. A general public poster can be downloaded at <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/covid-19-information-help-prevent-the-spread-poster>.

Other general precautions that should be implemented at all funeral services include:

- Clean and disinfect surfaces before and after the service, particularly high touch surfaces such as handrails, door handles, chair backs, areas where food is offered, washrooms, etc. Refer to <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/ppih/if-ppih-covid-19-environmental-cleaning-public-facilities.pdf> for more information.
- Attendees must stay home if they have any symptoms, such as cough, fever, shortness of breath/difficulty breathing, sore throat or runny nose.
- Encourage anyone at high risk of severe disease (e.g., those 65 years of age and older or with underlying health conditions) to stay home.
- Minimize public contact with the decedent. Touching the decedent is not recommended, as multiple persons touching the decedent adds to the potential for transmission. Kissing the decedent should not be permitted.
- Consider other options for allowing increased attendance, such as virtual or live-streamed services.
- Ensure alcohol based hand rub is available at the entrance and exit at minimum and that hand washing basins are accessible and stocked with supplies. Encourage frequent handwashing through signage at the facility entrance.
- Eliminate or restrict food service. While COVID-19 is not a foodborne illness, it is spread via hand to mouth contact therefore the provision of food is discouraged at all gatherings including funeral services. If food is provided, it should be pre-packaged. Open foods should never be self-serve. Hand sanitizer should be provided wherever food is served.
- The traditional use of pallbearers should be reduced. The use of a weight assisting device to lessen the number of pallbearers needed and limiting the transport distance when possible to reduce exertion and heavy breathing should be considered.

## 7. Handling of deceased persons by non-licensed individuals.

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Handling of deceased persons by non-licensed persons (e.g., religious or cultural groups, family or friends) should be minimized, especially in cases of confirmed/probable COVID-19. Washing and dressing is allowed. Routine practices (see above) must be followed. Individuals 65 years of age and older or with underlying health conditions should be highly discouraged from participating in these practices.

## 8. Definitions.

**Non-licensed person** – the person(s) handling deceased bodies do not hold a license issued by the Alberta Funeral Services Regulatory Board (AFSRB) that authorizes the holder to enter into funeral services contracts with members of the public.

**Probable Case** – a person with clinical illness for COVID-19 who is a close contact of a lab confirmed case, or a person with clinical illness for COVID-19 who meets exposure criteria (e.g. travel) and in whom diagnosis of COVID-19 is inconclusive.

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