

COVID-19 Guidance for Funeral Homes

COVID-19 is an infection caused by a new type of coronavirus. COVID-19 can present as an acute respiratory illness in humans. The virus is spread mainly from person-to-person through close contact. More information on COVID-19 can be found in the Toronto Public Health [COVID-19 Fact Sheet](#).

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), as [essential services](#), and are permitted to remain open during the COVID-19 pandemic. With current community transmission of COVID-19 in Toronto, funeral homes should take extra precaution in employing infection prevention and control (IPAC) measures to help prevent the transmission of COVID-19.

Recommendations for funeral homes on how to best protect families and their staff:

Review IPAC measures

- Funeral directors should review their IPAC policies and procedures to ensure they are consistent with professional best practices, including guidance provided by the [Bereavement Authority of Ontario](#) and the [Funeral Service Association of Canada](#).
- Staff should be trained and familiar with the IPAC policies and procedures, including additional precautions relating to COVID-19 and occupational health and safety guidelines.
- The appropriate use of personal protective equipment (PPE) should be reviewed with staff, including [donning](#) and [doffing](#) procedures for gloves, face protection (e.g. masks, goggles), gowns and shoe covers.

Restrictions for individuals under self-isolation

- In the case of a death related to COVID-19, it is possible that close contacts (e.g. shared same household) of the decedent will be in self-isolation. Other people may also be in self-isolation due to a high-risk exposure through other contacts or travel.
- Persons who are experiencing symptoms of acute respiratory illness or are required to self-isolate **cannot** attend the funeral home for any reason, including the visitation, funeral and burial during their self-isolation period.
 - Clients under self-isolation may make funeral arrangements by other means, such as by telephone, video conferencing or appointing another person to make the arrangements on their behalf.
- Due to capacity constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, funerals and interments may not be delayed and must be carried out immediately or as soon as possible.
 - Meaningful commemorative events, memorial services, and life celebrations for the deceased person can be carried out after the pandemic has passed.
- Toronto Public Health can assist in ensuring that those in self-isolation are aware they cannot attend the funeral home, interment, or have visitors to their home.

Conduct screening to prevent the spread of COVID-19

- All staff should be aware of the signs and symptoms of COVID-19, including:
 - fever
 - cough
 - difficulty breathing
 - muscle aches and tiredness
 - sore throat
 - headache
 - runny nose
 - new loss of taste or smell
- Require staff who are sick to stay home:
 - Staff who have symptoms of acute respiratory illness must stay home, and not attend work until they are symptom-free for at least 24 hours.
 - Staff who have travelled outside of Canada must stay home, and self-isolate for 14 days after returning to Canada.
 - Visit our [website](#) to learn about [assessment centres](#), and to help determine if further health care is required.
 - Remind staff about the importance of reporting illness to their supervisor/manager.
 - Provide attendance and sick leave policies and procedures that compensate staff for staying home if they are sick.
- Active screening:
 - Post signage in visible areas which clearly explains the screening process and the rules and conditions for entry.
 - Screening should occur in a designated area near the main entrance. The areas should allow for a minimum of two metres (six feet) distance between staff conducting screening and the person being screened.
 - Actively screen family, mourners and religious officials prior to entry by asking the following:
 - Do you *or* any member of your household have any of the following symptoms: fever/feverish, new or existing cough, or difficulty breathing?
 - Have you travelled outside of Canada within the last 14 days?
 - Have you had close contact with a confirmed or probable COVID-19 case?
 - Have you had close contact with a person with acute respiratory illness who has been outside Canada in the last 14 days?
- Individuals who have answered **NO** to all questions can enter the funeral home after performing hand hygiene (i.e. washing hands thoroughly with soap and water for 15 seconds. If soap and water is not available use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with 70-90% alcohol concentration).
- Individuals who have answered **YES** to any of the questions should not be permitted to enter the funeral home.
- Make alcohol-based hand sanitizer available at the screening station.
- Screening may be conducted in advance by telephone, email, or other methods.

- Encourage individuals to visit our [website](#) to learn about [assessment centres](#), and to help determine if further health care is required.

Increase communication with attendees and staff

- Post signs at all entrances instructing attendees and staff not to enter if they are sick.
- Post educational materials to encourage behaviours to prevent transmission such as:
 - [Physical Distancing](#)
 - [How to Protect Yourself](#)
 - [Information about COVID-19](#)
 - [Wash your Hands](#)
 - [Cover your Cough](#)
- Information can also be communicated on the funeral homes website and through automated telephone and e-mail messages.
- Stay up to date with information about COVID-19 through the [Toronto Public Health](#) website.

Support and encourage proper hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette

- Educate staff and attendees on proper hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette.
- Provide alcohol-based hand sanitizer (70-90% alcohol) in dispensers near entrances and other high touch locations for attendee and staff use. Monitor and refill as needed.
- Provide additional supplies such as tissue boxes and no-touch waste receptacles in appropriate areas/locations.
- Avoid touching your face, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Post [Cover your Cough](#), [Hand Washing](#) and [Hand Sanitizing](#) signage in visible locations

Implement measures to encourage physical distancing

- Physical distancing refers to the practice of avoiding close contact by keeping a distance of two metres (six feet) from others. Strategies to encourage physical distancing can include:
 - Avoiding physical greeting practices such as handshakes and hugs.
 - Staggering appointment times to reduce the number of people attending the funeral home at the same time.
 - Utilizing technology as an alternative to a physical meetings, such as phone, email, video and e-signature applications to sign required paperwork.
 - Arranging chairs/seating areas farther apart and/or place signs in fixed seating spaces (e.g. pews, benches).
 - Limiting attendance to the visitation, funeral service and burial (e.g. immediate family only).
 - Currently, the limit of attendees is limited to [not more than 10 persons](#) (as of March 28, 2020). This limit does not include funeral home staff.
 - The use of webcasting or other virtual technologies (e.g. recording the service) for those who cannot attend.
 - Recommending that the family hold a larger memorial gathering at a later date after the pandemic has passed.

Precautions for visitations and funerals

- Viewing of the body for mourners is permitted.
- There is no known risk associated with being in the same room at a visitation or funeral service with the body of someone who has died of COVID-19.
- People should avoid touching, kissing or having direct contact with the body of someone who has died of COVID-19.
 - If contact with the body is important due to religious or cultural practices, mourners should wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), including disposable gloves and keep the contact to a minimum.
 - Perform hand hygiene immediately after contact with the body.
- Some activities can increase the chance of COVID-19 spreading among funeral attendees even at a distance. Activities such as group singing and self-serve food or drink (e.g. water pitchers or buffet) should not be included in ceremonies.
- Use of [non-medical masks](#) can be considered by the attendees as they may mitigate pre-symptomatic or asymptomatic transmission of the virus if clean and properly fitted.
 - Medical masks should be reserved for healthcare workers.
- Persons who are at a higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 (e.g. older adults, those with chronic underlying conditions) should be encouraged not to attend the visitation or funeral service.
- When the family leaves, thoroughly clean and disinfect the funeral home, paying special attention to high touch surfaces the family may have come in contact with during their visit.
- Observe and enforce maximum attendee directives governing how many people can attend funerals and burials.

Enhance environmental cleaning and disinfection protocols

- Enhance cleaning and disinfection policies and procedures.
- Disinfectants should have a Drug Identification Number (DIN). A DIN is an 8-digit number given by Health Canada that confirms it is approved for use in Canada. Check the expiry dates of products you use, and always follow the manufacturer's instructions.
 - Refer to [Health Canada's list of hard-surface disinfectants for use against coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) to search by product name, active ingredient, company etc.
- Chlorine bleach solutions may be used for disinfection if appropriate for the surface.
 - Prepare chlorine bleach solutions according to the instructions on the label or in a ratio of:
 - 1 teaspoon (5 mL) bleach per cup (250 mL) of water, or
 - 4 teaspoons (20 mL) bleach per litre (1000 mL) of water.
 - Ensure a minimum of two minutes contact time and allow to air dry.
 - Prepare fresh bleach solution daily.
- Educate staff on how to use cleaning agents and disinfectants:
 - Required disinfectant contact times (i.e. amount of time that the product will need to remain wet on a surface to achieve disinfection).
 - Safety precautions and required personal protective equipment (PPE).
 - Directions for where and how to securely store cleaning and disinfectant supplies.
 - Review Public Health Ontario's [Cleaning and Disinfection for Public Settings](#) fact sheet.

- Designate staff to clean and disinfect high traffic areas and frequently touched surfaces and objects (e.g. doorknobs, elevator buttons, light switches, toilet handles, countertops, hand rails, chairs and pews).
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces at least twice per day, and when visibly dirty.

Body Management

For specific information on body management (e.g. transportation, handling, embalming), please refer to guidance provided by the following authorities/agencies:

- Bereavement Authority of Ontario
 - [Registrar's Directives](#)
 - [Procedure for Removals of Deceased from Hospitals and Long-Term Care facilities](#)
 - [Routine Practices in the Bereavement Care Setting](#)
 - [Additional Precautions in the Bereavement Care Setting](#)
- Ontario Ministry of Health
 - [COVID-19 Guidance: Funeral and Bereavement Services](#)
- Public Health Agency of Canada
 - [Interim guidance: Death care services and handling of dead bodies during the coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#)

More information

For more information, visit our website at www.toronto.ca/COVID19 or call us at 416-338-7600.

References

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