



Indigenous Services Canada – Alberta Region Practical Guidance for Funerals, Wakes or Memorials During the Current COVID-19 Pandemic

It is difficult to lose a loved one under normal circumstances, and is more difficult given the current COVID-19 pandemic situation. We understand that the need to gather, to recognize, to mourn, to support each other, is human. Not being able to have a funeral, memorial or other traditional/cultural ceremony following the death of a loved one, can be heartbreaking.

Funerals, however, like all other public gatherings, are very risky at this time. Even small gatherings can increase the possibility of spreading the COVID-19 virus. It can be particularly dangerous for Elders and people with pre-existing medical conditions to attend events such as funerals. It is essential that public health directives regarding public gatherings and physical distancing continue to be followed under all circumstances.

The following guidance outlines how to ensure COVID-19 is not transmitted during this time. This guidance should be followed regardless of the cause of death.

Transmission of COVID-19

COVID-19 causes infections of the nose, throat and lungs. They are most commonly spread from an infected person through:

- respiratory droplets generated during coughing or sneezing
- close, prolonged personal contact, such as touching or shaking hands
- touching something with the virus on it, such as clothes or furniture, then touching your mouth, nose or eyes before washing your hands

Although evidence continues to emerge, care should be taken when handling bodies of deceased persons with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 as the virus could potentially be transmitted if an individual touches their eyes, nose, or mouth after being in direct contact with:

- respiratory fluids; or
- contaminated objects/surfaces or material associated with the deceased¹

Planning for a funeral

Although burials should take place in a timely manner, in accordance with local practices, funeral ceremonies not involving the burial should be postponed, as much as possible.

The dignity of the deceased, their cultural and spiritual traditions, and their families should be respected and protected throughout.

People who have died from COVID-19 can be buried or cremated.

Provincial and territorial restrictions to contain the spread of COVID-19 may also affect funerals, as well as cemetery and crematorium operations, even when the death was unrelated to COVID-19. Therefore, check local public health directive prior to holding a funeral or other visitation services to ensure the safety of service-goers and funeral service workers.

Viewing of the body and/or funeral service

Wakes and funerals are unique situations due to their emotional and spiritual components. If burial is being postponed, viewing of the deceased is still possible. Whether the viewing is in the home, or in a pre-determined facility, the following procedures are recommended:

- Consider the use of virtual technologies (e.g. telephone, video conference, video recordings) in place of in-person services and gatherings. Posting these on social media, publically or privately will need to be in keeping with the family wishes.
- Consider limiting the number of people involved in the ceremony to only members of the immediate family/same household.
- Physical distancing of all individuals, including the funeral director, religious leader, Elder or others², should be at least 2 meters or 6 feet at all times. In cases where space is limited, particularly in homes, the numbers allowed into the venue should be controlled or consider holding the ceremony outside to maintain physical distance.
- Wearing a homemade facial covering that covers your mouth and nose may be helpful in providing some protection for others around you, for a short period of time³.
- Individuals who are ill, or have high-risk medical conditions must not attend. Friends, family and other visitors should not touch or kiss the body.
- Recognizing the sacredness of ceremony and the use of ceremonial objects, we recommend that ceremonial objects not be shared amongst participants.
- Should touching of the body or clothing occur, ensure that the individuals wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water or applies hand sanitizer (with alcohol content 60% or more).
- Maintain a list of all participants, in the event that tracing needs to be done.

DO NOT permit self-serve buffets. If necessary, provide single-serve foods in individual containers, while maintaining physical distancing of 2 metres or 6 feet. Individuals tasked with burying the body (placing in the grave), should wear gloves and once burial is complete, remove gloves and wash hands with soap and water.

Consideration for death in a community

The majority of deaths from COVID-19 are likely to occur in healthcare settings where healthcare personnel are available, and have access to appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) to manage the dead bodies.

However, in the event that a community member is suspected to have died of COVID-19 related illness **outside of a healthcare facility**, such as in the home, please contact healthcare personnel immediately to remove the body.

In some instances, community members may have to perform certain functions out of necessity or for cultural or spiritual reasons. Direct contact should be avoided unless absolutely necessary. If untouched, bodies of the deceased are not a transmission risk to community members. If the recently deceased was known or suspected to have COVID-19 and if the body is touched, gloves should be worn and proper hand hygiene should be followed after touching the body.

Appropriate precautions should then be taken to clean and disinfect that area appropriately, once the body has been removed following the Environmental Cleaning and Disinfection and Waste Management recommendations below.

Environmental cleaning and disinfection and waste management if the deceased was suspected or confirmed to have COVID-19

Cleaning an area with normal household disinfectant after someone with (COVID-19) has left, or a body of the deceased has been moved, will reduce the risk of passing the infection on to other people.

Cleaning and disinfecting:

All cleaning products should be used in accordance with manufacturer's instructions:

- Please refer to instructions on [Hard-surface disinfectants for use against coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), and Health Canada's approved [List of hard-surface disinfectants for use against coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#).⁴ Environmental cleaning products registered in Canada with a Drug Identification Number (DIN) and labelled as a broad-spectrum virucide are sufficient for SARS-CoV-2, the virus causing COVID-19 disease, or
- A diluted bleach solution (0.1% sodium hypochlorite, i.e. a ratio of 1 teaspoon (5 mL) per cup (250 mL) OR 4 teaspoons (20 mL) per litre (1000mL) of clean water) or 70% ethanol may also be used to disinfect, as these solutions are expected to significantly reduce coronavirus infectivity on surfaces within 1 minute.

- Wear disposable or washing-up gloves and aprons (as required) for cleaning. After use, these should be double-bagged, stored securely for 72 hours, then thrown away in regular garbage after cleaning is finished.
 - Using a disposable cloth, first clean hard surfaces with warm soapy water. Then disinfect these surfaces with the cleaning products you normally use. Pay particular attention to frequently touched areas and surfaces, such as bathrooms, grab-rails in corridors and stairwells and door handles.
 - If an area has been heavily contaminated, such as with visible bodily fluids, from a person with coronavirus (COVID-19), please contact local health authority for assistance as they are equipped with the appropriate Personal Protection Equipment (PPE).
 - Wash hands with soap and water for 20 seconds, after cleaning contact areas.
- Laundry
 - All laundry used by the deceased (linen and clothing), should be placed in a laundry basket/plastic bag.
 - Machine wash laundry in hot water (60 - 90°C) and laundry detergent.
 - If machine washing is not possible, soak clothing hot water and soap in a large bucket/drum using a stick/rod to stir, being careful to avoid splashing.
 - Empty the bucket/drum, and soak laundry in 0.05% chlorine for approximately 30 minutes (this may cause discolouration).
 - Rinse laundry with clean water, and place in dryer or allow to fully dry in sunlight.
- Waste
 - Use gloves, if possible when handling waste.
 - Place waste in plastic garbage bag.
 - Wash your hands with soap and water or hand sanitizer (with alcohol content of at least 60%) after disposing the garbage bag.

References

- 1 https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331538/WHO-COVID-19-IPC_DBMgmt-2020.1-eng.pdf
- 2 Covid-19: Letter to faith community leaders from Canada's Chief Public Health Officer: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/covid-19-letter-faith-community-leaders-from-canada-chief-public-health-officer.html>
- 3 <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/news/2020/04/ccmoh-communication-use-of-non-medical-masks-or-facial-coverings-by-the-public.html>
- 4 Hard surface disinfectants and hand sanitizers. <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-health-products/disinfectants/covid-19/list.html>