

Information for Deathcare Workers and Employers Regarding COVID-19

Source: U.S. Department of Labor/OSHA

This section provides guidance for deathcare workers, such as coroners, medical examiners, autopsy technicians, funeral directors, and other mortuary workers. This guidance supplements the general, interim guidance for U.S. workers and employers of workers with potential occupational exposures to COVID-19, above.

Until more is known about how the COVID-19 spreads, CDC and OSHA recommend using a combination of standard precautions, contact precautions, airborne precautions, and eye protection (e.g., goggles or face shields) to protect mortuary and other deathcare workers with exposure to the virus.

Mortuary and other deathcare workers who have contact with the remains of people who have died from COVID-19 infection must be protected from exposure to infected blood and body fluids, contaminated objects, or other contaminated environmental surfaces.

Employers of mortuary and other deathcare workers are responsible for following applicable OSHA requirements, including OSHA's Bloodborne Pathogens (29 CFR 1910.1030), Personal Protective Equipment (29 CFR 1910.132), and Respiratory Protection (29 CFR 1910.134) standards. See the Standards page for additional information on OSHA requirements.

Prompt cremation or burial of the remains of individuals who have died of COVID-19 can help prevent worker exposure to the virus. (State and local requirements may dictate whether or not the remains of individuals who have died of certain infectious diseases can be buried or if they must be cremated.)

Follow recognized good biosafety practices to prevent or minimize transmission of infectious agents (i.e., COVID-19). To protect workers from COVID-19 exposure, OSHA recommends suspension of *post mortem* or autopsy procedures on patients with suspected/confirmed COVID-19 infection. Although the infection process is not fully understood, this recommendation considers the potential for very high viral load (i.e., the number of viral particles in the body) at death and sources of exposure to workers performing autopsy procedures. If deemed necessary and appropriate, OSHA recommends strict adherence to basic safety procedures used for any autopsy on human remains, the general guidance applicable to all workers provided at the beginning of this page, and the controls described below.

Engineering Controls

Perform autopsies on remains of people who have died from COVID-19 infection in autopsy suites that have adequate air-handling systems. This includes systems that

maintain negative pressure relative to adjacent areas and that provide a minimum of 6 air exchanges (existing structures) or 12 air exchanges (new construction or renovation) per hour. Ensure that room air exhausts directly to the outside, or passes through a HEPA filter, if recirculated. Direct air (from exhaust systems around the autopsy table) downward and away from workers performing autopsy procedures. CDC's Guidelines for Isolation Precautions: Preventing Transmission of Infectious Agents in Healthcare Settings provides guidelines for AIIR use and recommendations for air exchange rates, which are similar to what should be followed in autopsy suites. Section VIII - Infection Control for Laboratory and Pathology Procedures of CDC's Infection Control in Healthcare, Home, and Community Settings for SARS also provides guidance applicable to pathology work, including autopsies, for coronaviruses.

Use a biosafety cabinet for the handling and examination of smaller specimens and other containment equipment whenever possible.

Equipment, such as saws, should be equipped with vacuum shrouds to capture aerosols.

Administrative Controls

Restrict the number of personnel entering the autopsy suite. This may involve training mortuary workers, such as medical examiners or autopsy technicians, to perform environmental services tasks (e.g., cleaning and decontamination) in lieu of additional workers entering such areas.

Minimize aerosol-generating procedures (AGPs), performing only those that are necessary to perform the autopsy or prepare remains for cremation or burial.

Minimize the number of staff present when performing AGPs. Exclude those who may be necessary for other procedures but not specifically the AGP.

Safe Work Practices

Follow standard safety procedures for preventing injuries to/through the skin during autopsy. Use caution when handling needles or other sharps, and dispose of contaminated sharps in puncture-proof, labeled, closable sharps containers.

Personal Protective Equipment

All mortuary workers and other deathcare workers who have contact with human remains known or suspected to be contaminated with COVID-19 must wear appropriate PPE (see OSHA's PPE standards, 29 CFR 1910 Subpart I). For workers performing autopsies, this includes typical autopsy PPE, such as:

- Double surgical gloves interposed with a layer of cut-proof synthetic mesh gloves
- Scrub suit worn under an impermeable gown or apron
- Goggles or face shield

- Shoe covers
- Surgical cap

Additionally, because of the sustained likelihood of aerosol generation during various steps of autopsy procedures, use respiratory protection as part of a comprehensive respiratory protection program that meets the requirements of OSHA's Respiratory Protection standard (29 CFR 1910.134) and includes NIOSH-certified disposable N95 or better respirators, medical exams, fit testing, and training. Powered, air-purifying respirators (PAPRs) with HEPA filters may provide increased worker comfort during extended autopsy procedures.

Remove PPE before leaving the autopsy suite and follow appropriate disposal requirements. After removing PPE, always wash hands with soap and water, if available. Ensure that hand hygiene facilities (e.g., sink or alcohol-based hand rub) are readily available at the point of use (e.g., at or adjacent to the PPE doffing area).

For other workers handling human remains:

- Wear nonsterile, nitrile gloves when handling potentially infectious materials.
- If there is a risk of cuts, puncture wounds or other injuries that break the skin, wear heavy-duty gloves over the nitrile gloves.
- Wear a clean, long-sleeved fluid-resistant or impermeable gown to protect the clothing.
- Use a plastic face shield or a surgical mask and goggles to protect the face, eyes, nose and mouth from potentially infectious body fluids.
- If there is a risk of aerosol generation while handling human remains, use respiratory protection as part of a comprehensive respiratory protection program that meets the requirements of OSHA's Respiratory Protection standard (29 CFR 1910.134) and includes NIOSH-certified N95 or better respirators, medical exams, fit testing, and training. PAPRs with HEPA filters may provide increased worker comfort during extended autopsy procedures.

See the OSHA Fact Sheet, Health and Safety Recommendations for Workers Who Handle Human Remains, for more guidelines to ensure worker safety when handling human remains.