



Standards for Funerals and Burials in Malta during the COVID-19 pandemic

Applicability

The following standards are issued under the Public Health Act Chapter 465 of the Laws of Malta. These standards apply to all funerals and burials in Malta during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Route of transmission of SARS-Cov-2

The main route of transmission of SARS-Cov-2 is through respiratory droplets either by inhalation or deposition on mucosa. Another less likely route is through contact with contaminated objects (fomites), due to persistence of the virus on surfaces (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), 2020).

Incubation period

The average incubation period of SARS-Cov-2 is between 5 to 6 days, with a range of 2 to 14 days. The virus can also survive in the environment for up to 3 hours in aerosols, 4 hours on copper, up to 24 hours on cardboard, and up to 3 days on plastic and stainless steel (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), 2020).

Standards for Funerals

The Superintendent of Public Health hereby orders that all funerals shall be held in accordance with the following standards:

- Funeral director is not to visit the home of the family of the deceased to organise funerals, except in situations where communication problems may exist.
- Funeral director is to keep a log of all drivers and the contact details of all persons transported.
- The hearse and family members are to be at the mortuary half an hour prior departure time from mortuary. The number of attendees at the funeral is to be limited, ensuring adequate physical distancing of 2m between persons, especially if from different households. Standards for choirs should be followed, available at the following links: [English](#) / [Maltese](#) .
- Live streaming of the service, if so desired, could be an option to further limit the number of attendees.



- For those attending a funeral at a place of worship, the protocols for places of worship should apply, including provisions of social distancing and wearing of masks.
- Vulnerable individuals are encouraged not to attend a funeral due to their increased risk of morbidity and mortality in case of infection.
- All participants should always also wear a face mask, covering nose, mouth and chin, throughout the duration of the ceremony.
- Persons from the same household should attend the service together and should not mix with those from different households.
- Memorial cards are to be distributed by only one person, with sanitisation of hands prior to handling.
- No condolence books may be used.
- People who are unwell or have COVID-19 symptoms should not attend the ceremony and remain in self-isolation at their home.
- Those in mandatory quarantine are not allowed to attend the ceremony.
- Immediate family/next of kin of the deceased are to proceed directly to cemetery following the service; although understandably a difficult and emotional time, close physical contact (such as hand shaking, back patting, hugging, kissing) should be avoided especially between persons of different households.

Standards for Burials

The Superintendent of Public Health hereby orders that all burials shall be held in accordance with the following standards:

- Copies of burial permits and cause of death are to be referred to the family member/s by email where possible.

Only immediate family members/next of kin are allowed to gather around during the burial; physical distancing of 2m is to be maintained at all times between persons of different households.



Confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19

Risk of transmission from a dead body of an active COVID-19 case

Both WHO and ECDC state that the risk of transmission when handling a deceased body is low, with there being no evidence of this happening to any substantial degree. Possible ways through which one can get infected from a dead body include direct physical contact without the use of the appropriate PPEs (triple layer mask and gloves) with human remains or fluids containing the virus, and from fomites (objects which are likely to carry infection, such as clothes, utensils, and furniture) (World Health Organization (WHO), 2020); (European Centre for Disease prevention and Control (ECDC), 2020); (Rani, 2020).

Care after death and preparing the body of a COVID-19 confirmed or suspected case for transport

This section refers to the preparation of the body after death and before transport. Personnel who are in close contact with the body should always apply infection control measures including proper hand hygiene both before and after close contact with the body, and proper use of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPEs) such as face shields/goggles, medical masks, gowns and gloves (European Centre for Disease prevention and Control (ECDC), 2020).

The PPE to be used is based on the risk profile of the individual:

- Someone handling the dead body at the mortuary is considered to pose a moderate risk thus an N95 mask and gloves are recommended.
- On the other hand, for people transporting dead bodies, a triple layer mask and gloves should suffice.

It should be also noted that one might consider limiting direct physical involvement of non-healthcare staff (European Centre for Disease prevention and Control (ECDC), 2020).



According to the WHO interim guidance before transportation of the body:

- All tubes, drains, catheters and any other indwelling devices should be removed.
- Trained medical staff should make sure that any leaking body fluids are contained.
- Handling of the body should be kept to the minimum time possible.
- The body should never be disinfected.
- The body is placed in a double body bag and transferred to the mortuary as quickly as possible. No special transportation equipment is required for the transfer of the body.

Storage and preparation of body before burial

- No preparation of the body (i.e. washing the body, tidying/shaving hair, cosmetic services, or trimming nails) or embalming is to take place, so that excessive manipulation of the body is avoided.
- Shrouding and preparation of the body for funeral can be achieved by performing standard infection control procedures and appropriate PPE to prevent transmission via direct contact. Such PPE include gloves and long-sleeved water-resistant gown.
- In the case of COVID-19 related deaths, viewing of the body is not permitted.
- Cleaning of mortuary environmental surfaces is essential, with the mortuary being always kept clean and properly ventilated. Environmental surfaces should be cleaned with soap and water or disinfectant solution. After cleaning the surfaces, a disinfectant with a minimum concentration of 0.1% sodium hypochlorite (bleach) or 70% alcohol is placed on the surface for a minimum of 1 minute.
- Appropriate PPE should be worn during the cleaning and disinfecting processes. Clinical waste must be handled and disposed of properly as infectious waste.
- Once the body is inside a closed coffin and the coffin has been sanitised PPEs are **not** needed for transfer.



In the case of burials of suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19

- When it comes to those who place the body inside the grave, WHO advises that masks and gloves are worn and hands washed with soap and water after the removal of gloves, when the burial is finished. The gloves should be disposed of safely in a closed bin. In accordance with WHO guidance, the number of individuals conducting the burial should be kept to the minimum required.

References

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