

# COVID-19 FAQs for Decedent Care at DUH

*This FAQ provides guidance designed to ensure that DUH healthcare workers are following current recommendations while providing care to patients and their families if a patient passes away who is suspected or confirmed of having COVID-19 infection.*

## **Is the patient still infectious after death?**

COVID-19 is an emerging viral infectious disease that we are still learning about. The main way that COVID-19 spreads is thought to be from close contact with an infected individual. While we know that it can be spread through droplets and may become airborne during certain procedures, it is not thought that a patient can spread the infection after death through these routes.

It is possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching contaminated surfaces (bedrails, bedside table, patient's clothing and skin) that have the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose or eyes. There is no evidence of persons having become infected from exposure to the bodies of persons who died from COVID-19 while providing post-mortem care when wearing recommended PPE.

## **What steps can be taken to limit exposure of staff to COVID-19 positive patients?**

Upon declaration of death, the care nurse or designee providing post-mortem care can place the patient in a single body bag after verifying the decedent's identity per hospital policy (toe tag, ID band on wrist or ankle, and one tag on the outside of the body bag). If possible, staff already at the bedside performing post-mortem care can transfer the body bag onto the transport cart if available and eliminate the need for decedent care personnel to enter the room. This will help limit the number of staff who need to have contact with a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19, including the release of the body to the approved decedent care partner (funeral home or crematorium). The body bag should only be opened under controlled conditions using recommended PPE once in the morgue.

## **What PPE is recommended for decedent care personnel?**

If the decedent has been placed in the body bag and it is closed and tagged, decedent care personnel only require shoe covers, gown and gloves to enter the room and transfer the body to the transport cart. If not, a face mask and face shield/goggles should also be worn.

Follow current PPE guidelines:

- Don shoe covers, gown and gloves to enter the room to transfer the decedent to the transport cart. Add face mask and face shield/goggles if the decedent is not already in a single body bag.
- If the room has not met airborne isolation air exchange guidelines, an N95 respirator or PAPR hood is worn for respiratory protection upon entering the room.\*
- Before doffing PPE, wipe the body bag and transport cart with a hospital-approved disinfectant wipe prior to exiting the room.
- Doff PPE and perform hand hygiene.
- Don clean gloves and move transport cart into the corridor; wipe down the outside of the transport cart again using a hospital-approved disinfectant wipe.
- Doff gloves, perform hand hygiene and proceed to the morgue.
- No PPE is required during transport to the morgue.

\* In an effort to conserve PPE, every effort should be made to avoid the need for respiratory protection. Staff should wait at least 30 minutes to enter an airborne infection isolation room (AIIR) or HEPA-filtered room (ICU, ED, negative pressure) or 2 hours for a regular room without a HEPA filter in place.

**Should I wear Duke-provided scrubs while I am at work?**

No, this is not necessary. By wearing recommended PPE correctly, you have protected your clothing from contamination. As an extra precaution:

- Change clothing upon arriving home and put work clothing immediately in the wash.
- Do not wear lab coats or other non-essential clothing or take other personal items into rooms of patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19.
- Launder items such as lab coats frequently or leave them at work between uses.

**What happens to the decedent's personal belongings?**

Any personal belongings and/or valuables are double-bagged and returned to family or sent to Admissions, per current hospital policy.

**Do I need to wear gloves or other PPE during transport to the morgue?**

No. Once the decedent has been placed in a body bag, the outside of the bag is cleaned and disinfected using hospital-approved disinfectant wipes. The transport cart is also cleaned and disinfected prior to exiting the room and again before leaving the unit. Decedent care personnel should wear gloves whenever touching the body bag is necessary (e.g., repositioning on the transport cart).

**Should decedent care personnel meet with families?**

When possible, all required paperwork should be completed over the phone to limit contact for the safety of families and staff.

**What is the role of clinical staff in decedent care?**

Clinical staff can assist with decedent care by instructing next-of-kin to contact the Decedent Care Office (919-684-6264) to provide information regarding the disposition of their loved one. They can also help by verifying contact information for next-of-kin when they are notified of the patient's passing.

**Can the family view the body in the morgue? If so, do they wear any personal protective equipment?**

Currently, the recommendation is visitation will not occur at DUH. Extenuating circumstances will be presented to DUH leadership and Infection Prevention.

**Where can I direct questions from funeral homes?**

Please refer funeral homes to the CDC's guidance: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html>

**What is the policy on requests for autopsy or a medical exam?**

- Outside of a Medical Examiner request, we will not be performing autopsies.
- If a medical exam is required, which will preferentially be deferred altogether, the medical examiner will do an external exam in place if needed using telemedicine (stills and video only, if needed). For telemedicine assistance, a liaison with ID may be necessary. Autopsy should only be performed if absolutely necessary, and only at the central DRAH office, not at DUH.