

A Guide for the Bereaved during the COVID-19 Pandemic



COVID-19: A Guide for the Bereaved

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to change the usual ways we deal with the loss of a loved one. This guide is concerned with the period from the time a death occurs up to the burial or cremation. It is intended to provide clear advice as to what bereaved families might expect as they make funeral arrangements. In particular, it outlines the changes that have become necessary to what are often fundamental and time honoured rituals and processes associated with marking the passing of a loved one during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The death of a loved one is always a difficult and traumatic event. Even during those times when we have full support of faith, community and family, it is never easy. Unfortunately, during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic it will be even more difficult. Many of the normal religious, cultural and familial traditions place a very strong emphasis on the ritual of a funeral. These now have to be restricted because of the public health measures currently in place.

None of these restrictions will be easy. However, it should not mean that people cannot grieve or share memories and stories of loved ones. Coping with the loss of a loved one is one of life's biggest challenges. People dealing with loss during this period will need the same emotional support and the same love that they would need in normal times - perhaps even more so. Everyone should be encouraged to help one another. To care if they cannot touch, to connect via the various communications channels that are available to us if they cannot meet and mourn with family and friends in the usual way.

In time this pandemic will pass. In time life will return to normal. And when it does, there will be opportunities for us all to collectively remember, to consider additional memorial services, and to honour in our families, in our communities, with our friends, those who have passed away during these exceptional times. Until then, we will all have to say goodbye to our loved ones in different, difficult and, in many respects, unsatisfactory but essential ways.

COVID-19 and Our Grief

COVID-19 has affected almost every part of the daily lives of everyone living in Ireland. It is also impacting on how we as a society, as a community, as a family cope with the death of a loved one from the time of their passing to their burial or cremation.

During the current pandemic, some of the ceremonies, traditions and rituals that are fundamental to the grieving process in Ireland, and which we have relied on for comfort and solace, will not be available to us. The measures outlined here have not been taken lightly. The restrictions introduced are necessary to protect public health. But they also seek, if in a limited way, to facilitate the bereaved as far as possible.

Arrangements that were normally private between families, funeral directors and Faith and ritual leaders who conduct ceremonies around death are being modified in these unprecedented circumstances. The main changes include:

- reporting deaths as a result of COVID-19 to the District Coroner;
- restrictions on access to the body following death;
- making funeral arrangements via telephone and email;
- in general, a limit of ten people attending any ceremony, with social distancing, and no associated social gatherings.

Pronouncement of death, the role of the Coroner and post mortems

There is a formal process around death. This involves the pronouncement of death by a doctor, notification of the District Coroner where a death is reportable, certification of death by a doctor and registration of death by the Health Service Executive (HSE). Given the current pressures on medical professionals, provision is being made for other qualified persons, including registered nurses or paramedics, to pronounce death.

Where the death of a person is reportable to the coroner this will normally be done by the medical practitioner (doctor or nurse), paramedic, funeral director, the person in charge of a mortuary or the occupier of a dwelling in which the deceased person was residing at the time of death or by An Garda Síochána. In these cases, the release of the body to the funeral director, under instruction from the family, remains a matter for the coroner.

If the deceased had a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19, the death will be reported to the coroner but a post mortem will not normally be required, unless required for other reasons.

In cases where it is unclear whether COVID-19 was a cause of death, a COVID-19 test may be required. In most cases, this should not delay the process and there will be no necessity to await results before proceeding with funeral arrangements.

Funeral Arrangements

The first stage of the funeral process traditionally commences when the funeral director collects the body and prepares it for burial. This is often a private family time.

In the case of a person who dies, or is suspected of dying, due to COVID-19 the HSE has provided clear guidance as to how funeral directors care for the body while protecting their own health and safety. This guidance can be viewed online at <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/>.

Due to its communicable nature, in all confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19, the body may be placed in a body bag before being placed in a coffin.

The funeral director is responsible for looking after the deceased and facilitating all the various practices and ceremonies which take place. Depending on the faith or belief of the deceased, such practices and ceremonies may ordinarily include embalming, washing of the body, kissing the deceased, having the body lie in an open casket in a home as well as other practices that may be important to families and loved ones. However, due to the risks presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, these practices have been curtailed in accordance with the HSE Guidance to Funeral Directors referred to above. It should be noted that the HSE guidance may be updated and subject to change as issues emerge.

Normally, the deceased will remain in the funeral home until the burial service. However, should the need arise, additional temporary mortuary facilities are being provided. The representatives of the deceased will be informed of the location of their loved one at all times.

Funeral Service

In order to ensure that families and loved ones, funeral directors, the religious and others who officiate at services and other workers are protected, a number of restrictions have been put in place. Representatives of faith communities and cultural groups will provide guidance to their own communities on how they will organise revised funeral arrangements. These will take account of the restrictions that have to be put in place.

When arranging funerals during the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the key messages in the HSE guidance include:

- That the funeral director avoids direct contact with any family member who has been identified by public health authorities as being a close contact of the deceased. They may be established by telephone before meeting individual family members.
- In light of current restriction on mass gatherings and the requirement for physical distancing, public reposals and gatherings at funeral homes are discouraged. The funeral should be private and limited to a maximum of ten people as advised by the public health authorities. Only the following should attend:
 - members of the person's household
 - close family members
 - close friends if the deceased has no household or family members.

- Numbers attending funerals, however, may be restricted further in smaller enclosed places. Social distancing must be practiced at all times. Depending on local circumstances individual churches or other funeral locations may also put in place restrictions on numbers.
- Mourners should follow the advice on social distancing when travelling to and from the funeral gathering.
- Social distancing of at least 2m between identified groups is recommended for everyone.
- Physical interactions including shaking hands and hugging should be avoided.
- Arrangements should not be advertised in papers and online (the funeral notice can be placed but the arrangements should not appear).
- Families can advise relatives privately of the funeral arrangements. The following wording has been suggested as an example:

A private funeral will take place due to government advice regarding public gatherings. Those who would have liked to attend the funeral, but due to current restrictions cannot, please leave a personal message in the section below 'Condolences'.

- In the papers, a similar message can be written with reference to www.rip.ie or funeral director company website to offer the family condolences.
- The use of condolence books is discouraged and people are recommended to send condolences through social media, online websites, text or by letter.
- The family should be advised that they may have a Memorial Service at a later date.
- Where possible, close contacts and relatives of the deceased should use their own transport for attendance at the funeral.

This guidance relates to all funerals, including bereavements that are COVID-19 related and non COVID-19 related. Families of the deceased are asked to respect any advice or restrictions that might be put in place during this difficult time.

Post Funeral Gatherings

Unfortunately, due to the restrictions in place at this time, family and friends of the deceased will not be able to have gatherings after the funeral service. While this will undoubtedly be difficult for all concerned, there will be an opportunity, in time, for family and friends and the wider community to come together to celebrate the life of the deceased.

Financial Assistance

There can be significant costs associated with funerals. For those for whom this may be an issue, there are a number of supports in place available from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. Persons experiencing bereavement may be eligible to avail of an Exceptional Needs Payment to cover certain costs associated with a funeral. For more information, please see <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/80b24c-exceptional-needs-payments-swa/>.

Other Help/Resources

Coping with loss in normal times is difficult. Grieving in these exceptional times brings added difficulty. It is important to know that there is help out there.

The HSE will ensure that the End of Life Care Committees, which are in place throughout the Irish acute hospital system, are aware of the guidelines and process changes regarding COVID-19. They will manage this as part of their overall end of life and bereavement care services.

The HSE and Irish Hospice Foundation is in the process of setting up a National Bereavement Helpline to support bereaved people following the death of a family member or friend.

HSE Bereavement Support leaflets will be made available which will contain important information for bereaved persons and will offer direction to a range of support resources.

The HSE is working in conjunction with a large range of faith and humanist groups to develop a virtual platform providing chaplaincy support to patients in hospitals and community facilities.

For assistance and guidance in grieving and planning a funeral in these exceptional times there is helpful information available here <https://hospicefoundation.ie/bereavement-2-2/covid19-care-and-inform/>.

Guidance in registering a death in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, whether it be related to COVID-19 or other causes, is available at this website <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/49c66f-registering-a-death-in-ireland/>.

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) has compiled words about coronavirus and COVID-19 with plain English explanations. It can be found here <https://www.nala.ie/covid-19-words-explained/>

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This leaflet may be subject to amendment from time to time. Please check www.gov.ie for latest version.