

Facts, Not Fear: Covid19 deaths and funerals

Funeral Consumers Alliance
funerals.org
fca@funerals.org

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When a disaster or a pandemic occurs, people are understandably fearful. But humans are prone to amplifying our fears beyond reality, and one of the first places the human mind goes when in a state of fear is to thoughts of death and dead bodies.

Throughout history, people have believed that illness and plague arise from and are spread by the dead, or by “miasmas” in the air. Though we figured out “germ theory” more than a century ago, these folk beliefs are still a big part of our mental landscape. Our heightened emotional state also makes it difficult to know when we’ve left the realm of the rational and are instead ruminating.

Put simply, we have a strong emotional belief that the dead “contaminate.” Physically, psychologically, spiritually. This causes undue worry about things that are not going to happen, and it is causing many of us unhelpful stress.

Let’s separate fear from fact. It’s OK and normal to be anxious, and no one is “weird” or abnormal for having these fears. But they do need to be put in check, and they can be put in check. We all have reasonable concerns about *actual* health and safety problems, and those are what need our attention.

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Q: Will I catch Covid19 from a dead body?

A: This is very unlikely compared to the objective risk to us from those living with the illness. It helps to remind yourself to walk through these questions with logic.

Remember what you know. You know that Covid19, like most illnesses, is spread by human contact. That is, it’s living, breathing, coughing, sneezing humans who spread disease to each other. The dead do not do these things.

And how many dead bodies do you come in contact with every day? Most of you reading this will answer “zero.” But you’ve been sick many times in your life, haven’t you? None of your illnesses came from the dead, but from your spouse, your kids, or your coworkers.

What do the experts say? Largely the same things they have always said. Except in the cases of rare and especially virulent diseases (on a level comparable to Ebola, which Covid19 is **not**), disease transmission from the dead to the living is very uncommon.

Yes, it can happen, but those most at risk are personnel who handle the dead shortly after the time of death, particularly embalmers who put themselves at heightened risk by opening an otherwise intact body for an optional cosmetic procedure. The CDC has never recommended embalming as a public health measure.

On Covid19, the CDC says this:

“There is currently no known risk associated with being in the same room at a funeral or visitation service with the body of someone who died of COVID-19.”

For more detail, see: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html>

Q: Do the bodies of those who died from Covid19 need to be cremated immediately?

No. Why? For the reasons listed above. The dead are not the source of transmission of this pandemic, or of any other historical pandemic that comes to your mind. Communicable diseases do not live indefinitely in dead humans, either—they need a living body for a host environment. This means also that you do not have to worry about microbes “contaminating” the ground from burial.

For more detail, see our white paper Dead Bodies and Disease: The Danger That Does Not Exist. <https://funerals.org/?consumers=dead-bodies-disease-danger-doesnt-exist>
We cite information from the CDC and the World Health Organization.

Q: Is cremation dangerous? Will it spread the virus?

No. Again, remember what you already know. The virus cannot even withstand hot water and soap that we use to wash our hands. There is no chance it would survive a crematory running at 1600 degrees Fahrenheit.

Q: Won't funeral homes be overrun?

On the national level on average, no. The US has almost twice as many funeral homes, on average, as it would need to accommodate the number of dead and to give the funeral homes full-time work. The national average number of “cases” by an American funeral homes is only 117 annually. That is just more than two funerals per week; there is lot of excess capacity on average.

But in hotspots like New York City and other urban areas, morgues, funeral homes, and crematories are experiencing a temporary spike. We've spoken to funeral directors and hospital pathologists in New York City this week (the first week of April, 2020, as this is written) who say they're running out of space, or that crematories are backed up.

This is obviously stressful for everyone working in these areas. Our 24-hour news media environment, however, not only informs us about these things, but leaves us feeling that

we ourselves are part of a panic situation, or an emergency. There is no “emergency” that the dead pose to us. There are dedicated and overworked hospital and funeral home staff doing the best they can.

In those regions hit hard, yes, it is likely that if you are awaiting the cremation of a loved one, there may be a delay of a week or two before it is performed and you get the remains back. We know that is not any family’s first choice. But perspective matters—this has been commonplace in states like California, where a five-day wait for cremation is common in many areas and a standard business practice (those crematories offer expedited service for an additional fee) during normal times already.

Q: I’ve seen news stories about refrigerated trucks parked outside hospitals to keep up with the bodies. Doesn’t this mean things are bad?

This is an example of how easy it is to fall into an “atmosphere of fright” from news coverage. What these trucks “mean,” without media fright-framing, is that hospitals and funeral homes made a logical, practical decision to accommodate a temporary and unexpected overrun of dead bodies. It means that the dead are being kept refrigerated, which is a good thing as it gives families time to decide on arrangements that might include having a body present in a condition that is viewable.

We Americans are not used to confronting the dead realistically. Seeing refrigerated tractor trailers with the dead in them is, for most Americans, a bracing first-time look at world of death the way it really is. The only time most Americans ever see a dead body (if they see one at all), is through the cosmetic veil of the embalmed dead safely tucked away in a casket in a quiet, gracious parlor.

The dead are not lying uncollected in the street. They are being kept appropriately refrigerated in a secure mobile “room”, out of public view. We are not in a dystopian novel, we are in an unanticipated pandemic where professionals are making rational work-around choices to help us all. This isn’t “bad”, it’s reassuring.

The staff here at FCA understand these fears—we shared them too before we came to work in this field. We don’t criticize people for having them, because we know it’s human and normal. But we also know that plain-language, direct conversation about facts is the most effective way to help people ease those fears.

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What other questions or concerns do you have about death, dying, and funerals in times of pandemic? Let us know so we can address them for you. Drop a note to **josh@funerals.org**