

Post-death Physical Care

[Further information can be found in the [Post-Death Care/Home Funeral Care videos](#). We also recommend the webpage [Special Circumstances in Home Care of the Body](#).]

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Dealing with the body

- If the Death Journeyer died in a hospital, hospice or residential-care facility, it would be wise to request that you be allowed to **wash and prepare the body at the facility** before it goes into rigor. In all likelihood, the nurses would have all the equipment necessary — and might be willing to help if there are any complications.
- A **hospital bed, stretcher, or massage table** are the easiest platforms to use when caring for the body, because they are narrow and allow for adequate access to all parts of the body. A narrow table can also be used. Post-death care can be done in a normal bed, but may cause extra complications.
- Put a **tarp** under the table or around the bed to protect the floor (or use a heavy plastic tablecloth or shower curtain instead).
- Put a **plastic sheet** between the bottom sheet and the mattress (see instructions on "[Moving the body](#)" below). This could be done before death, but may be too disturbing to the Death Journeyer — as plastic sheets tend to be somewhat hard and make a crackling noise when they move.
- If you have been caring for the Death Journeyer while they were actively dying and there was no concern then about infections, there is no need now to wear **gloves/masks/etc.** — except when dealing with released fluids from the bladder and bowels (or perhaps the mouth). In general, you use the same degree of protection that you did while the Death Journeyer was alive. [Note: a live body is usually more contagious than a dead one, up until major decomposition begins.]
- It is best to **wash, dress, and move** the body (to where it is to 'lie in honour') **before you close the eyes and mouth**, as the methods for keeping them closed require the body to lie still for a period of time. The body can be moved (for washing and dressing) after rigor mortis releases, but it is harder to get the eyes and mouth to stay closed at this point.
- If the Death Journeyer has not eaten or drunk anything close to the time of their death, there probably will not be a significant **release of internal fluids**. If they have been eating or drinking, some fluids will likely be released immediately or shortly after death. A gentle pushing on, or massaging of, the abdomen will help to release anything remaining in the bladder. An adult diaper (Depends/etc.), a condom on a penis, or an old towel (later thrown out) can be used to catch all fluids. If you suspect that the bladder is not entirely empty — despite pushing or massaging the abdomen — and might leak as the body is moved around, you can place a rolled washcloth between the legs. The rectum can be 'stopped up' with cotton batting or a greased tampon, if you suspect that it has not released all of its contents.
- If rigor mortis has already begun to set in (note that the body may stiffen and relax a couple of times during the first hours), you can **massage the arms and legs** gently to make them more flexible. Otherwise, you may need to wait until rigor mortis has released to continue caring for the body.

- **Wash the body**

- **Wash the hair first** — unless the Death Journeyer had a very recent shower or bath and already washed their hair, or they are bald or have minimal hair. [See the video [Washing the Hair, Face, and Mouth.](#)] Washing the hair can be complicated, so usually requires a couple of people. If possible, move the body so that the head is beyond the end of the bed/table, and slip a narrow board under the head to hold it — otherwise, someone will need to hold the head so you can reach underneath it.

Place a large bowl, pail, or bucket on the floor under the head, to catch the used water. Cut a small hole in one (closed) corner of a large garbage bag. Put the entire closed end of the garbage bag into the bucket. Put a rolled towel under the neck. Tuck one side of the open end of the bag over the rolled towel and under the body's shoulders. Then one person holds the bag open and makes sure that all the hair is contained within it, while another person washes the hair. The bag then acts as a funnel to channel water into the bucket. [This is a very useful trick learned from Jerrigrace Lyons.]

A small pot — or even a watering can with a narrow spout — can be used to pour water over the hair; shampoo in the usual way. Although it is not necessary to do as thorough a job as for a live person, make sure that the scalp is reasonably clean. Dry shampoo can be used instead, if the hair is not too oily. Conditioner can also be used, but is not necessary — unless it is needed in order to style the hair. Rinse the hair thoroughly, and gently dry and comb it out. If the Death Journeyer is to have a Green Burial, you might want to use shampoo (and conditioner) made of natural substances.

- **Teeth should be cleaned** at this point; and the mouth swabbed with vinegar, mouthwash, or a light solution of tea-tree oil (which will reduce the 'death breath' smell). If there is any concern about when rigor will set in, and if the Death Journeyer wears dentures, clean them (and perhaps dunk them in mouthwash) before anything else, because you may not be able to get them back in when rigor mortis starts to set in. Also check with the cemetery or crematorium staff, as dentures may need to be removed before cremation or burial anyway.
- **Wash the face.** Make sure to get inside and behind the ears, around the neck, and into any creases. If the Death Journeyer had a bath or shower in the past day or so, you may only need to **wash the face and hands** and not the rest of the body.
- In preparation to wash the body, place **towels** around and underneath it to catch the liquids.
- There is **no need to wear gloves** except when dealing with released fluids — unless there are open sores or unhealed incisions on the body (in which case, and especially if they may be infected, it is wise to double-glove).
- **Wash the whole body** with water plus a small amount of antibacterial/antimicrobial soap (or a few drops of tea-tree oil, which has antimicrobial properties), using a clean facecloth or wash-mitt. [See the video [Washing the Body.](#)] Be gentle in washing and drying the body, because the skin may be fragile. [Note: washing the body is traditionally considered to be an act of final respect, and/or of love and care. It will also tend to slightly slow down the early stages of decomposition, and decrease any smell coming from the body.]

- Wash the **front side** of the body first; then **roll the body** to one side, and then to the other, to wash the **back side**. To roll the body onto its side, place the arm on one side over the abdomen, and move the leg on the same side so its ankle crosses over the other one. This raises the hip and shoulder slightly on that side.

Stand on the opposite side of the table and brace your hips (or abdomen) against the edge of it. Then reach over the body and wrap one arm around the raised shoulder and the other arm around the raised hip, and roll the body towards you until it is braced firmly against you. This is the easiest and safest way to expose the back side of the body, while another person washes it. [See instructions on "[Moving the body](#)" below, and the death-care videos which are posted on our [Post-Death Care](#) page.]

- **Rinse the body** in the same way you washed it, and then **dry** each part as you are working on it. You can add **fragrant oils** to the rinse water, if you wish.
- If there are any unhealed wounds (especially if they are open or infected), **re-bandage** them (wearing gloves). Duct tape can be used on dry skin, as the final stage to seal large wounds.
- There may be some leakage of blood or mucus from the mouth, when the body is rolled on its side. This is normal and just needs to be wiped up (use gloves if there has been any systemic infection).
- You may also want to **trim the Death Journeyer's fingernails**, if they have become very long.
- **Remove all soiled sheets** (see instructions on "[Moving the body](#)" below).
- If the body is to be **shrouded**, this is the time to put the shroud in place on the bed or table, as it will make it easier to wrap the Death Journeyer later. However, you may want to have the Death Journeyer lie directly on an ordinary clean sheet (with the shroud below it), so that any further fluids or sloughing off of skin cells are captured when the ordinary sheet is removed, just before winding the shroud (see information on "[Shrouding the body](#)" below).
- If the Death Journeyer is to be clothed, **dress the body** now. [See the video [Dressing the Body](#).] Even if it has not begun to go into rigor mortis, it can be difficult to get clothing on the body — and will require at least 2 people (although you may need a third person in some cases). Powdering the body with cornstarch may help to reduce friction — thus aiding in slipping the outfit on.

Loose clothing will be much easier to work with, but that may not be the Death Journeyer's choice. Especially if the body has begun to stiffen, or if the chosen outfit is a bit small, you can slit the back of the shirt/blouse/jacket/etc. and the pants/skirt — make sure to cut through any waistband, but not the collars. This will make it easier to get the visible (front side) parts of the clothing on properly. Then roll the body slightly over on each side as you tuck the back parts of the clothes in.

- **Pants** — if they have a front opening and are fairly loose, it may not be necessary to cut them. If you do need to cut the centre of the back, be sure to stop a few inches before the mid-crotch seam. Lift the body's legs and put both through the pants-legs simultaneously. Pull up over the legs and abdomen. Roll the body onto one side and pull the pants up over the hips on the exposed side. When the body is flat again, you may be able to yank the other side over the hips; otherwise, roll the body the other way.
- **Shirt** — even if it has buttons down the front, it is much easier to get it on if you slit the shirt up the back (leaving the collar intact). Place the shirt on the chest upside-down and backwards — so that the slit back is facing upwards, and the bottom hem of the shirt is near the body's neck. Place both arms into the shirt-arms simultaneously, pull the sleeves up to the shoulders, slip the collar over the head, and tuck the cut edges of the shirt under the body.

- **Skirt** — use the same method as the pants. Cut the back from the centre of the waistband downwards. Even if the skirt has a back zipper, you will probably need to cut the back of the skirt a bit further down than the bottom of the zipper.
- **Dress** — undo buttons or zipper in back, or cut the back of the dress through the collar and down at least to the hips. Pull the dress over the legs, as far up over the abdomen as possible. Roll the body onto one side, and pull that side of the dress over the exposed hip. When the body is flat again, you may be able to yank the other side of the dress over the opposite hip; otherwise, roll the body the other way. Lay the body flat and get both arms as far as possible into the sleeves, before pulling them up the rest of the way. You may need to roll the body onto both sides to get the dress all the way up and over the shoulders. Tuck the cut edges under the body and adjust the dress as needed.
- If the Death Journeyer usually wears **make-up**, you can add it now. Green concealer (Physicians' Formula or other brands are available in any drug store) will lessen any blemishes or blotches: you may want to use it on both the face and the hands. [Note: if these blemishes or blotches are caused by pooling of blood, they are likely to disappear in time — because gravity pulls the blood to lower areas of the body.]
- **Place dry ice or Techni-Ice under the trunk of the body** (see instructions for "[Using Dry Ice or Techni-Ice Gel Packs](#)" below).
- **Close the Death Journeyer's eyes** (see the second half of the video [Dressing the Body](#)), preferably before rigor mortis sets in — this can usually be done with a gentle push on the lids. If they do not stay shut, then place a small bag of seeds/rice/etc. (a sandwich- or snack-sized zip-lock baggie will do) over the eyelids for a couple of hours. A hankie or soft cloth under the bag can reduce the chances of getting crease-marks around the eyes.
- **Close the mouth**, preferably before rigor mortis sets in, by pressing upward on the jaw. If that doesn't work, try putting a pillow under the head, tilting it forwards to encourage the mouth to close. You can also add a small pillow (or rolled-up towel) under the chin to gently push it upwards. If that doesn't work, tie a long, soft (but not stretchy) scarf around the top of the head and under the chin; tighten it until the mouth closes. Smooth out creases in the scarf where it touches the face, to avoid leaving marks on the skin. Keep it there until the mouth stays closed by itself (at least 10-15 minutes, or possibly until rigor mortis sets in).

Dealing with Rigor Mortis

Rigor Mortis (literally "stiffness of death") is caused by a chemical change in the muscles after death. Initially, the muscles relax (causing release of body fluids), but then they contract — except in small children, where the process may be less noticeable. Rigor typically begins at 2-6 hours after death (the timing varies greatly depending on temperature) — before the stiffening begins, the body is quite flexible. Gentle massage/movement can loosen the joints temporarily, if rigor has already started when you begin moving or washing the body. It generally takes 10-24 hours for the body to move into full rigor, as it cools to the ambient temperature; and then up to 3 days after death for rigor to dissipate, as the cells begin to decompose. You will be able to feel rigor releasing, if you check the degree of stiffness in the fingers and larger joints.

Be prepared for the paling of most of the skin. There may also be dark-purplish blotches where the blood pools in the lowest areas of the body. The skin will eventually turn slightly greenish-grey.

Supplies for Dealing with Post-Death Physical Care

- *Protection* — Gloves & masks, if there is any concern about systemic or local infections; bandaging materials (for re-bandaging any wounds or unhealed incisions); garden gloves (with rubber-tipped fingers) for handling dry ice. [Note: dry ice will cause frostbite, if hands are not well protected. A heavy cloth can be used instead for handling the dry ice, but there is more chance of touching a small bit of it.]
- *Several sheets*
 - a plastic one to protect the mattress (a shower curtain, a drop cloth, or a couple of large plastic garbage bags can be used instead), or Chux pads (the kind used in hospital to protect the mattress);
 - regular sheets both under and over the body —
 - if you are using dry ice, make sure there are two layers of protection (sheets or clothing) between it and the body to protect from frostbite;
 - if you are using Techni-Ice, frozen in a regular fridge/freezer, one layer is sufficient;
 - extra sheets for after the body-washing (as the original ones will get wet);
 - a sheet over a Death Journeyer who chooses to be 'returned as they were born' (i.e., naked).
 - a favourite quilt can also be used to cover the body and/or to shroud it in (if there is to be a green burial, it must be made from a biodegradable material).
- *Towels* —
 - large ones for surrounding and laying under the body while washing it
 - small ones to dry the body, and to lift the chin up or tie around the head (to close the mouth, if no scarf is available)
 - an old one to catch bladder and bowel contents (or use adult diapers, menstrual pads, and/or condoms to catch released body fluids).
- *Washing equipment* — drop cloth on the floor; plastic sheet for bed or table; wide basin or pail; watering can/small buckets; large garbage bag (to be used as a funnel for the hair-washing water); antibacterial/antimicrobial soap and/or tea-tree oil; washcloths or wash-mitts (good to have several for different parts of the body); shampoo/conditioner; comb or brush; fragrant oils for the rinsing water (if desired); toothbrush & toothpaste; vinegar or mouthwash, and cotton swabs.
- *Cooling the body* —
 - dry ice and Styrofoam container for storing it; 6-10 brown paper bags (to put dry ice in — assuming one initial placement, and one replacement); OR
 - *Techni-Ice* — about 14 sheets for an average-sized adult (which can be refrozen and used again) — or a smaller number of Techni-Ice sheets for small children or emaciated elders
 - frozen gel packs for small children or emaciated elders (dry ice is too strong for their body mass), or to start to cool a larger body
 - electric fans (for generally cooling the room)
- *Dressing the body* —
 - clean clothes set aside for this purpose
 - shroud (if there is to be a green burial, the clothes or shroud need to be made entirely from biodegradable materials) or sheet/quilt to cover body (if the Death Journeyer chooses to be buried naked)
- *Pillow for head and shoulders* — this both presents your loved one as looking more comfortable, and stops any fluids dribbling out of the mouth from the lungs.
- *Closing eyes and mouth* —
 - for eyes: small beanbag or zip-lock baggie of rice, lentils, or beans; plus a cloth to protect the face from creases
 - for mouth: long, thin, non-stretchy scarf

Moving the Body

[We recommend watching the "[Moving the body](#)" video, as the technique is somewhat difficult to explain in words. The video demonstrates how to move a body using bedsheets, how to carry it through a doorway, and how to place it into a coffin. This video is available under [Post-Death Care & Home-Funeral YouTube Videos](#), on [CINDEA's](#) Post-Death Care page.]

Carrying the body on sheets — It is possible to move the body just using the sheets below it — although it is wise to use a double layer of sheets, especially if your loved one is heavy. It requires 6-8 people (depending on the weight and size of your loved one), perhaps with one extra person supporting the head. The bigger the sheets the better, because they will give a more substantial rolled edge to grasp. Lay the sheets crosswise on the table or bed. Roll the loose edges of the sheets up to the sides of the body, including the head; the rolled edges will provide something substantial for the carriers to grab onto, as well as cradling the head.

To move through a doorway — Position the bearers slightly staggered (rather than directly across from one another) on either side of the Death Journeyer, holding the rolled-up sheets. One person goes through the doorway at a time, with the body being shifted slightly from one side to the other to allow the next person to move through the doorway in turn.

Using a cardboard coffin — [Note: cardboard coffins come in different sizes, so make sure that you get one that will fit your loved one. Technically, cardboard 'coffins' are usually caskets, which have four sides; coffins actually have six.] If you are planning to use a cardboard coffin, it may suffice for moving the body. You may want to secure the body into the coffin, if you are concerned about it shifting about. This can be done by placing rolled towels/etc. between the body and the coffin sides.

If you are covering the Death Journeyer with a sheet or quilt in the coffin, these towels can be hidden under the sheet/quilt. If your plan is for the Death Journeyer to lie in honour in the coffin, you will need to place dry ice or Techni-Ice under the body and around its edges. You can then place a sheet or quilt atop the ice to hide it.

If you plan to use a plain, undecorated cardboard coffin — but wish to have something more formal-looking for visitation/lying-in/etc — it may be possible to rent a wooden coffin and put the cardboard coffin into it. However, a rented coffin should probably not be used for a shrouded body, as you can't be 100% sure that there would be no leakage of body fluids.

Maneuvering — Before you try moving the body in its coffin, first measure the width of doorways — and all relevant dimensions of hallways, narrow spaces, stairs, etc. — to see whether they may rule out moving the body in a coffin at all (especially inside an apartment, and a building with an elevator). Unless you have an open-concept home with wide doorways, you should also try moving the empty coffin (held horizontally as if it had the body in it) through the route you would be using. This needs to be done to ensure that doorways, hallways, furniture, etc., will allow the coffin — plus the people carrying it — to move through what may be limited space.

If there is insufficient room to maneuver the coffin, place it outside the home (or wherever there will be no obstructions in the way of moving it out to a vehicle); when you are ready to transport the body to another destination, move it to the coffin using a sheet or other means. If stairs are likely to be a problem, you may want to consider the possibility of using the a-la-carte services that some funeral homes offer — and get the professionals to move the body.

Moving the body without a coffin — Especially if the Death Journeyer has chosen a shroud (in which case, there may be no coffin), a simple stretcher or bier can also be used, which is likely to be easier to maneuver than a coffin. Stretchers may be available for rent from distributors of emergency or outdoor-living supplies; or you might rent a more complex hospital/rescue stretcher (usually with legs and wheels) from a medical or a rescue-supply store.

Using Dry Ice or Techni-Ice Gel Packs

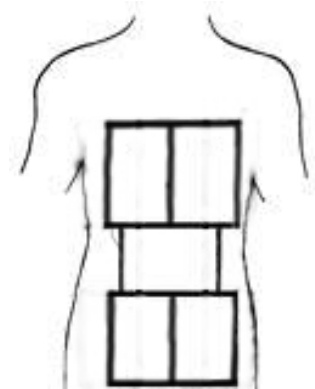
Sources of dry ice Dry ice will keep the body below 48° F/9° C — the required temperature for an un-embalmed body. Dry ice may be available at a grocery store (check the fish department, if you can't find a sign for it), or at a store that specializes in dry ice (check your Yellow Pages, or google for 'dry ice supplies' and your city). You will need to purchase 20-50 pounds of dry ice initially (depending on the size of the body), and then buy slightly less for at least one replacement when the original supply has evaporated. It comes in bricks, typically 10 pounds per brick.

Storage and handling of dry ice If you are not using it immediately, dry ice should be stored in a Styrofoam box — it would crack a plastic one. Even if it is well insulated in the container, it will evaporate within about 3 days. Fill any spaces in the Styrofoam box with crumpled newspaper, to insulate it further and reduce the evaporation of the dry ice.

You will also need heavy rubber or leather gloves to handle the dry ice, as it causes frostbite (regular surgical or kitchen gloves don't have thick enough palms and fingertips). It's particularly important that **the tips of the glove fingers be rubberized**, as this is where you are most likely to get frostbitten.

Package the dry-ice bricks in doubled brown-paper bags or several layers of newsprint, one 10-pound brick per package. If necessary, the dry ice can be broken up — once it is packaged in brown paper, put it into a pillowcase and hit it with a hammer or drop it on the floor several times. You may wish to put the packaged dry ice into a plastic bag as well; this may catch any condensation from damp surrounding air, and make it easier to handle the packages.

Placement of dry ice The body should be washed and dressed first, and then moved to where it will be lying-in-honour (for the next 2-4 days). The packaged dry-ice bricks should be placed between two sheets — one protecting the mattress, and the other protecting the body. Roll the body over onto one side, and place the packages under the trunk of the body. If the body is smaller, you may only need 3 packages — if larger or heavier, 5 packages may be needed. Use only enough to cool the body — the flesh should remain flexible, not stiff. [See the diagram for a typical placement. It is primarily the torso that needs to be cooled.] Make sure, however, that the room is well ventilated so that the carbon dioxide released from the dry ice has a chance to escape. Dry ice is safe to use, but the resulting harmless gas can make breathing feel difficult.



The first placement of dry ice will be used up in cooling the body to the correct temperature, and will have evaporated in about 24 hours. Hence, the dry ice needs to be replaced on the 2nd day. Once the body is cool, the second placement will last much longer — probably for 2-3 days. It is not likely that it will need to be replaced again, unless the weather has been particularly warm or the body stays at home for 4 days or longer. Most often, the Death Journeyer will be buried/cremated on the 3rd day — unless the timing makes this impossible for the cemetery or crematorium, or some family members have not yet been able to say their 'goodbyes'.

Gel packs Frozen gel packs are better for small children and very emaciated adults — dry ice is too cold for the minimal mass of their bodies. Gel packs can also be used temporarily for adults, while dry ice is being purchased.

"Techni Ice 4-ply HD Dry Ice Pack" This is a special kind of gel pack, which has been used as a replacement for dry ice because it is a lot safer. Be sure to get the **4-ply version**. It should be ordered in advance from the Manitoba distributor via <http://www.techniicecanada.com/>, and can be stored indefinitely and re-used. You will need to get two sets of 7 sheets of Techni-Ice (for a medium-sized body — more if it is a large person), so that one set can be in the freezer cooling while the other is in use. Turn your freezer to as low a temperature as possible — the colder it is, the quicker the Techni-Ice will cool the body. It may take 3-4 days in the freezer before the gel reaches maximum coldness.

The Techni-Ice arrives in a dry form; submerge it in water and follow the instructions that come with the product, until all the "cells" within it are fully distended. Typically this will take at least 10 minutes — perhaps much more — and the whole sheet needs to remain submerged the entire time (put something on it that's heavy enough to hold it down).

Placement of Techni-Ice It can be placed under the body in the same pattern as for dry ice. You may wish to also place a sheet of Techni-Ice over the abdomen. Another sheet can be cut in three pieces (2 cells by 4 in each strip); place a strip along each side of the body with one end in the armpit, and the third strip lengthwise between the thighs. These can be put in small pillowcases or cloth bags, if you wish, to absorb condensation of moisture. The first set of Techni-Ice will need to be replaced by the second set after about 12 hours, and then again as needed — immediately refreezing the just-removed set to be ready for re-use.

Shrouding the body

The word 'shroud' comes from Old English *scrud*, which means 'garment'. Simple one-piece shrouds may have been one of the oldest encasements for a dead body. Those who choose a green burial may prefer a shroud, rather than a casket, as it allows the body to decompose more quickly and thoroughly. If you wish to use a shroud for cremation, you should check with your local crematorium as to whether they will require anything additional — such as a cardboard coffin, or a bier or tray to carry the body on. [See "[Moving the body without a coffin](#)" above.]

There are many ways of shrouding besides the version that we are familiar with from ancient Egyptian mummies, where narrow strips of linen were wound around the body. Some are more like special garments that cover all parts of the body, such as traditional Jewish *tahrihim*. Others may be simply one or more sheets wrapped around the body, much as we would wrap a parcel; or can be made into a cloth body-bag. Some shrouds are sewn closed; others might be secured with long ties (cloth, rope, ribbon, etc.), or other kinds of fasteners.

A shroud may have one or several layers — three is common in some traditions, but a single piece of fabric the size of a flat bedsheet (queen or king) is sufficient. The Death Journeyer may choose to use their own regular bedsheets. Shrouds can be made of any material, but natural fibres — such as cotton, silk, or bamboo — are likely to biodegrade most completely. In some traditions, one's favourite quilt is the outer shroud. If a rougher material is used for an outer shroud, you may wish the inner layers to be softer as a sign of respect.

If the Death Journeyer chooses to go to back to the earth without clothes, you might want to shroud them and leave the face exposed until ready for cremation or burial — seeing the face may make it easier for friends and family to say farewell. If they're dressed, then you can wait until after the lying-in-honour period and shroud them just before the burial or cremation.

[Further specifics are on CINDEA's [Shroud](#) page — which contains graphic and written instructions for making 6 different types of shrouds, 2 of which don't require any sewing. See also CINDEA's video on [Final Preparations \(Shrouding a Body\)](#). The second half of that video demonstrates the simplest form of shroud — using a single flat bedsheet secured with cloth ties. Please note: most of the Web videos currently available show the traditional Islamic style, which is only one form of shrouding.]

Please feel free to contact us at contact@cindea.ca if you have any questions,
OR if you find out any further relevant information about your province/territory or municipality.

Notes: