

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](#).]

Please note: Links in this PDF appear as underlined green text, just as on [CINDEA's](#) website. [In some cases, the name of a section of a webpage or a PDF appears in green but not underlined; these are not actual links.] If you are having difficulty making the links work, click on the Hand icon (which looks like a cartoon outline of a person's hand) in your PDF reader. The Hand icon can be found on the toolbar that begins with an yellow-orange file-folder icon at the top of your screen, just below the menu bar.

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 **plastic sheet** between the bottom sheet and the mattress (see instructions on "Moving the body" in the last [Post-death Physical Care PDF](#) on the [Post-Death Care](#) page). This can 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 the Death Journeyer moves.
- **Close the Death Journeyer's eyes** before rigor mortis sets in, if possible — this can usually be done with a gentle push on the lids. However, if they do not stay shut, then place small bags of seeds/rice/etc. over the eyelids for a short time.
- **Close the mouth** before rigor mortis sets in, if possible — this can usually be done manually. If that doesn't work, try putting a pillow under the head to encourage the mouth to close. You can also put a small pillow (or rolled-up towel/etc.) under the chin to gently push it upwards. If these options don't work, tie a soft-but-firm long scarf around the head and chin and tighten it until the mouth closes, and leave it there until rigor mortis sets in (10-15 minutes may be enough).
- 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. 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, before major decomposition begins.]
- If the Death Journeyer has not been eating and drinking before their death, there is not likely to be any **release of internal fluids**. If they have been eating and drinking up to their death, there will likely be a releasing of internal fluids 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, if you think that it has not released all of its contents.
- If rigor mortis has already begun to set in (and it may come and go 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. [Note: rigor mortis sets in faster if the environment is cold. Although you may want to open windows where your loved one's body is, it is best not to cool the room too quickly before washing and moving the body to its final position.]

- **Wash the body.** [The YouTube video [Washing the Body](#) gives a demonstration of the technique.]
 - **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. Washing the hair can be complicated, so usually requires a couple of people helping. If possible, move the body so that the head is beyond the top end of the bed/table, and slip a narrow board under the head to hold it — otherwise, someone will need to hold the head. Place a wide basin (laundry bucket/etc.) on the floor under the head, to catch the used water. A small bucket — or even a flower watering can — can be used to pour water over the hair, then shampoo as usual. Although it is not necessary to do as thorough a job as for a live person, make sure that the scalp is clean. Dry shampoo can be used instead, unless the hair hasn't been washed recently. Conditioner can also be used, but is not necessary — unless it is needed in order to style the hair. If the Death Journeyer will have a Green Burial, it might be wise to use shampoo and conditioner that are made of natural substances.
 - **Teeth should also be cleaned** at this point, and the mouth swabbed with vinegar or mouthwash (which will reduce the 'death breath' smell). However, if the Death Journeyer wears dentures, you may not be able to get them back in when rigor mortis starts to set in. If you have time, and there is any concern about when rigor will set in, clean the dentures first. You should also check with the cemetery or crematorium staff, as dentures may need to be removed before cremation or burial anyway.
 - Start by placing **towels** around the edge of the body and underneath it to catch the liquids.
 - Begin washing the body at the **head**.
 - **Wash the whole body** with water and a small amount of antibacterial/antimicrobial soap, using a clean facecloth. [Note: washing the body is traditionally considered to be an act of final respect, and/or of love and care. It also will tend to slightly reduce the chances of early decomposition, and decrease any smell coming from the body.]
 - It generally works best if you wash **from the trunk out** to the ends of the arms and legs.
 - Wash the **front side** of the body first; then roll the body to one side, and then the other, to wash the **back side**. Bending the uppermost leg can give you more leverage — by either pulling on the knee or grasping the thigh from between the legs. It is useful to have several people helping, so that they can roll the body evenly and hold it while the washing is done. [See instructions on "Moving the body" and the suggested YouTube videos for moving and washing the body in the last [Post-death Physical Care PDF](#) on the [Post-Death Care](#) page.]
 - There is **no need to wear gloves**, except while dealing with released fluids — unless there are open sores or unhealed incisions on the body (in which case, it is wise to double-glove).
 - You may wish to add **fragrant oils** mixed into the rinse water, before **drying** the part of the body you are working on.
 - If the Death Journeyer had a bath or shower that day, you may only need to **wash the face and hands**.
 - If there are any unhealed wounds (especially if they are open, or infectious), **re-bandage** them (using gloves).
 - 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" in the last [Post-death Physical Care PDF](#) on the [Post-Death Care](#) page).
- If the body is to be **shrouded**, this is the time to put the shroud in place on the bed, 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" in the last [Post-death Physical Care PDF](#) on the [Post-Death Care](#) page).

- If the body is to be dressed, ***dress the body*** now. Even if the body 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 (better with 3-4). 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 consider slitting the back of shirt/blouse/jacket/etc. and the pants/skirt (make sure to cut through any waistband). This will make it easier to get the 'seeable' (front side) parts of the clothing on properly: then move the body slightly over on each side as you tuck the back parts of the clothes in.
- 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 blood, they are likely to disappear — because gravity pulls the blood to lower areas of the body.]
- **Place dry ice under the trunk of the body** (see instructions for "Using dry ice" in the last [Post-death Physical Care PDF](#) on the [Post-Death Care](#) page).

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). Rigor begins at 2-6 hours after death (sooner if the environment is cold) — during the earlier part of this period, 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 24 hours for the body to be in full rigor, as it cools to the ambient temperature; and then up to 72 hours after death to dissipate, as the cells begin to decompose. You will be able to feel rigor releasing by checking the degree of stiffness in the fingers and larger joints.

Be prepared for the paling of most of the skin, but dark purplish blotches where the blood pools in the lowest areas of the body. The skin will eventually turn slightly greenish-gray.

[Read more at [Rigor Mortis and Other Postmortem Changes](#).]

Please feel free to contact us at contact@cindea.ca if you have any questions,
OR if you find out any relevant information (not already on our site) about your province/territory or municipality.

Notes: