

# Safety Guidelines

## Bearing and Lowering a Coffin

To help you to brief the bearers, highlight potential risks and hazards and offer alternative options to make things easier.

Please read these carefully.

Credits: We wish to thank Simon and Jayne at [Heart and Soul Funerals](#) for much of this guidance

Carrying the coffin of the person who has died to their last resting place is an important responsibility and a rewarding thing to do.

## Who is responsible?

The person organising the funeral is responsible for the bearers' health and safety, making sure that they are fully briefed and are competent to undertake the task. This guide should help you perform this duty.

## What will you need?

- Six fit and strong people (two more would be helpful)
- Two or three 6m lengths of strong webbing to lower the coffin
- Two stout wooden bars to span the grave (called 'putlogs')

The webbing and putlogs are usually supplied by the gravedigger, but it is important to check beforehand. If you need to provide your own, putlogs should be 4'6" x 3" x 3" (1.4m x 75mm x 75mm) and of good quality knot free planed timber

An option is to have two folding trestles or a trolley to support the coffin next to the grave or in another location if a service is not held at the grave. These are not needed for a graveside service when the coffin can be rested on the putlogs.

## Before you arrive at the burial ground

**Survey the journey** - If possible, take a look at the whole journey before you begin, noting uneven ground, slopes and obstacles. Park the vehicle bringing the coffin as close to the grave to keep carrying distances short.

**Consider setting up early** - Take away the stress of bearing the coffin to the grave in front of assembled mourners by arriving an hour or more ahead of time and bringing the vehicle as close as possible to the grave. The coffin can then be lifted a much shorter distance, fitted with lowering straps, and placed over the grave on wooden poles that span the grave (putlogs). Take the vehicle away and relax until it's time to lower the coffin.

**Plan the lift.** - It is safer for the coffin to be carried low, by the handles. Check to make sure that they are properly weight-bearing and comfortable to use

## At the burial ground

**Think before lifting/handling** - Remove obstructions around the coffin, and ensure you have a clear path to where you are going both underfoot and above. Make sure the person on the other side of the coffin is about the same height as you. Put shorter bearers at the foot end. If you are bringing the coffin onto the shoulder, have someone extra at each end to assist with the lift.

**Feet first** - It is traditional to carry a coffin so that the body travels feet first. Many coffins are shaped, so the feet end is the more tapered end. For straight sided coffins, use something to mark which end is which (this could be a name plaque).

**Think about the weight** - Know the weight of the person in the coffin and bear in mind that wooden coffins are also quite heavy, adding up to 20kg. If the load is more than 90kgs (14 stones) you will need six bearers. If the load is more than 125 kilos (20 stones), you should think very carefully about carrying the coffin.

**Choose how to carry** - A coffin may be carried low, by the handles (you will have checked to make sure that they are weight-bearing first), or on the shoulders of the bearers. The former is more advisable, especially over uneven or slippery ground.

Keep the load close to your body. The coffin should be kept close to the body when handling it. If a close approach is not possible, try to slide it towards you before attempting to lift it.

**Adopt a stable position** - Keep feet apart with one leg slightly forward to maintain balance. Feet should be moved to maintain balance during the lift. Avoid tight clothing and unsuitable footwear which might impair movement.

**Get a good hold** - If it has weight bearing handles, use these. Otherwise ensure you have a firm grip of the underside and side of the coffin and, if you are raising the coffin to shoulder height, get a hand underneath it as you bring it onto your shoulder.

**Work as a team** - Have someone who leads the lift, saying ready, steady, lift, and the same for putting the coffin down. Work together.

- Employ good posture. At the start of the lift, slight bending of the back, hips

and knees is preferable to fully flexing the back (stooping) or fully flexing the hips or knees (squatting).

- Don't flex the back any further while lifting. This can happen if the legs begin to straighten before starting to lift the coffin.
- Avoid twisting the back or leaning sideways, especially while your back is bent. Shoulders should be level and facing the same direction as the hips. Turning by moving the feet is better than twisting and lifting at the same time. As you carry the coffin, keep your shoulders as even as possible, avoiding twisting your back.
- Keep the head up when carrying. Look ahead for obstacles, keeping your head up as far as possible, once the coffin is held securely and you are in motion.
- Designate one person at the front to give warnings. One of the front bearers can announce steps, uneven ground and obstacles. Or better, have someone walking with you to do this.
- Move smoothly. The coffin should not be jerked or snatched as this can make it harder to keep control and can increase the risk of injury. Walk slowly, coordinating your left and right steps with the person in front of you.
- Don't lift or handle more than can be easily managed. There is a difference between what people can lift and what they can safely lift. One guideline is about 25 kilos (4 stones) for each person. Don't forget that the coffin itself may weigh as much as 25kg (sometimes more). If in doubt, seek advice or get help. If you are finding it too heavy, say so, even though this may be difficult. Another means can always be found.
- Put down, then adjust. If precise positioning of the coffin is necessary, put it down as close to the right place as you can first, then slide it into the desired position.

## Trestles and webbing

If you are going to place the coffin on trestles, put one trestle in place so you can approach it without getting tangled up with another trestle, and have someone ready to slide the second trestle under as you put the front of the coffin on the first trestle. Have one trestle under the shoulders (broadest part of the coffin) and one eighteen inches in from the feet end.

While the coffin is on trestles in front of the grave, thread the webbing through the handles, under the coffin and up through the opposite handle. Pull through enough webbing to ensure that both sides have about 2.5m (8'6") spare.

If you are not using trestles, lay out the webbing on the grass above the grave in three bands about 0.5m (20") apart and rest the coffin on the webbing so that it can be threaded up through the handles, ensuring that both sides have about 2.5m (8'6") spare.

Webbings should be checked for signs of deterioration or fraying before each burial service. Frayed or damaged webbings must not be used.

## Lowering the coffin into the grave

After the webbing has been threaded, the bearers will carry the coffin to the grave where it will be placed on two putlogs across the grave. The left hand and right hand bearers must walk on the planks positioned on each side of the. This means the bearers on the soil-mound side will have to walk on a narrow ledge between the open grave and the soil, possibly in wet and slippery conditions. This is the most dangerous part of the process and should be taken slowly.

When the bearers are in position holding the coffin above the grave, two putlogs should be placed across the grave onto which the coffin may be placed prior to the committal. The distance between the putlogs should be approximately 1.2m (4').

It is not easy for bearers standing on planks at the edge of a grave to lower a coffin from shoulder height. We suggest that the coffin is carried 'underarm' by the webbing (or weight-bearing handles) at this stage.

Make sure there is someone directing inexperienced bearers at this stage, standing firmly on the ledge, taking their free arm if necessary to steady them. The bearers should ensure they stay closely together and do not rush or drag the other bearers on the ledge across.

If you do keep the coffin on shoulders whilst you position yourselves at the grave, it can be lowered from the shoulder, the bearers turning sideways towards the coffin and placing their hands under the coffin and gently lowering it onto the slats. Otherwise the same principles apply as outlined above. We strongly recommend that this manoeuvre is practiced beforehand.

When it is time to lower the coffin, the bearers take a firm grip on the webbing, then lift the coffin slightly so that the two putlogs across the grave can be removed (by someone else). The bearers then slowly lower the coffin by letting the webbing through their hands hand over hand (this has better control and less risk of friction burn than letting the webbing slip through the hands). Keep an eye on the other bearers and keep the coffin as level as possible. It is also a good idea to have someone at each end to make sure the coffin goes in straight. As you lower the coffin, keep your back relaxed and straight, and your knee slightly bent.

If you read this carefully, proceed with caution, visit the burial ground, brief your bearers in advance and put it into practice, you should be fine, so don't let this put you off. If you want to talk about it please call us on 01600 716438.

Again, we wish to thank Simon and Jayne at [Heart and Soul Funerals](#) for much of this guidance.