

Conference on Aging

BODY DISPOSITION FAQ (Compiled by Kel McBride)

Do I have to be embalmed?

No state requires embalming, except in some cases for transit across state lines. Embalming does “preserve” the body (but not indefinitely) and makes it less likely to smell. Many funeral homes have a policies requiring embalming for a viewing. Especially for a delayed funeral. This is understandable as they want to protect their image as well as the body’s.

Many people see embalming as a brutal process. The most common fluids used include formaldehyde which is harmful to the environment and can harm the embalmer. Yet for many it is a good option, for those that feel the need to see the body. Especially in cases when the viewing needs to be delayed. Funeral Directors told me that they advocate for embalming when disease has ravaged the body, an accident like a car wreck has damaged the body (and it can be visually restored), a body needs to be shipped overseas, children who have died, or soldiers returning from the field. Embalming can allow for a final viewing which is helpful for some.

What is aquamation?

Green cremation, water cremation, bio-cremation, dissolution, flameless cremation, and my favorite aquamation are all terms for alkaline hydrolysis, the use of water with the addition to heat, pressure, and alkaline chemicals to naturally decompose the body. Aquamation is very environmentally friendly option. It has one tenth of the carbon impact of cremation. And uses less water than casket manufacturing, just about 300 gallons of water (the equivalent of three days of living person’s water usage). The alkaline chemicals, sodium hydroxide and potassium hydroxide, are the same used to clean vegetables and that is in our shaving creams and soap.

What is a burial vault?

Almost all cemeteries require a vault or liner, bigger than the casket it is first to be placed into the earth. A vault is a six-sided box that fully encases the casket. A liner is 5 sided and leaves the bottom surface of the casket in contact with the earth. They ensure that as the earth settles, and the casket possibly collapses that the grass-level surface stays level. Level ground helps maintain the esthetics of the cemetery. More importantly the safety of its workers is also protected. Workers now use heavy machinery to dig graves (a backhoe can weigh more than 10,000 pounds) and mow the lawns. A shifting surface can make that work dangerous.

Where can I have a green burial?

There are environmentally focused facilities dedicated to green burial around the US. You can also find green burial sections in common cemeteries. With a little research you can find a spot for you. The Green Burial Council which advocates for Green Burial has a listing of cemeteries that have applied and been certified by their organization. There are more in the US than are listed, but it's a great place to start.

If you don't have a specific green burial cemetery close to you reach out to your local government officials that support your county, parish, or township to learn if there is any room in historical cemeteries and abandoned church graveyards. Those locations have been green burial sites for many decades. In Indiana, we can work township trustees to be buried in historic cemeteries.

What can be done with my cremains?

Most urns are buried. Sometimes in a plot made for a casket burial, often near family. There are also graveyard spaces dedicated to cremains burial that are smaller in size. If you want your urn kept by a specific person, I've got a question for you to ponder. What happens when that person dies? ...If your urn passes to another person next, then ask yourself what happens when that second person dies? To many estate sales people find abandoned urns. Don't let that happen to you.

Scattering is another option. We've all heard a variety of "Spread my ashes" variations. Rose gardens, sports fields, mountain tops, beaches, back-yard tree, and on graves are all places I've heard.

Your cremains can also be crafted into diamonds, sculptures, stained glass, tattoos, air balloons, pencils, vinyl records, metal pendants, hourglasses, ammunition, fireworks, and more.

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