

### *What is cremation?*

It's the process of reducing the body to ashes and bone fragments through the use of intense heat. The process usually takes two to four hours. Depending on the size of the body, the cremated remains will weigh three to nine pounds. The bone fragments are pulverized to about aquarium gravel texture. Depending on the fuel and temperature used, they are somewhere between a light grey and white color.

The percentage of cremations in the US is rapidly rising each year. In 12 states the cremation rate is over 50%. In England and Japan the cremation rate is close to 90%. In 2005, 46% of Americans said they will choose cremation for themselves. Primary reasons for choosing cremation are to save money, because it is simpler, less emotional and more convenient, and to save land.

### *Is a casket required for cremation?*

No, a casket is never required for cremation. However, most crematories do require that the body be enclosed in a rigid, combustible container. Under federal regulations, all mortuaries must make available an inexpensive cremation container often referred to as an alternative container. Customers may make or furnish their own suitable container.

### *How much does cremation cost?*

If an undertaker is used to transport the body, obtain permits, and file the death certificate, the average fee is \$1,200 (in 2008). However, prices can vary from about \$500 to well over \$3,000, often in the same market. If a visitation or a funeral service is held before cremation, the charges will be higher.

Many funeral consumer alliances offer members cremation services provided by funeral or cremation businesses for considerably less than the national average. Families who care for their own dead can use crematories directly at charges from \$200 to \$400 (2008).

### *Do I have to hire an undertaker?*

Most states permit private citizens to obtain the necessary death certificate and permits for transit and disposition. You should check first to make sure the crematory will accept the body directly from the family, as some crematories will only work through funeral homes.

### *Is a funeral service necessary?*

Visitation and a funeral service with a body present may be held before cremation or you may choose to have a memorial service without the body present. Cremation makes it possible to take more time to plan a service at a convenient time.

### *Can a casket be rented?*

Most funeral homes will rent a casket to a family that wants to have the body present for visitation or for a funeral service preceding cremation. After the service, the body is transferred to an inexpensive cremation container. Rental caskets often cost around \$700, however, so you might consider using the simple alternative container and draping it with an attractive cloth, a quilt, or a flag.

### *What can we do with the ashes?*

They can be placed in a niche in a columbarium, buried, scattered, or kept by the family. Cremated remains are sterile and pose no health hazard. Their disposition is, for the most part, not controlled, provided the landowner

grants permission.

**A columbarium** is an assembly of niches designed to hold containers of cremated remains. It is most often located in a mausoleum with a cemetery and at some churches.

**Earth burial** can be done in a cemetery or on private property. Most cemeteries will permit two or three containers in one adult-size plot. Some (unnecessarily) require that you purchase an urn vault. For home burial, keep in mind that unless you have a family cemetery on your property, eventually the land is likely to be sold and the land used for other purposes.

**Scattering** cremains over an area that had significance to the deceased is legal in most jurisdictions. Although there are commercial firms which will handle the cremated remains for a fee, most families prefer to do this themselves. Remains that are being scattered should be processed by the crematory to reduce all fragments to fine particles.

**Scattering at sea** is available to all veterans and dependents and is provided by the Navy or Coast Guard. Because sea burials are done at the convenience of the military, the family may not witness sea burial.

While federal regulations technically require cremated remains to be scattered three miles out from shore, the Environmental Protection Agency says they are not concerned about families scattering ashes at the beach and never enforce this regulation with private families.

**Keep** the cremains in an urn or nice box. You can buy an urn from a funeral home or on line, or you can use something else. When cremains are being saved to provide memories, it's nice to put them in a container related to the deceased's life, such as a favorite vase, a special wine bottle, a terrarium, etc.

Some funeral homes will suggest that you need to purchase a “temporary container”, but you have a legal right to refuse and use the container that comes from the crematory.

Cremains can also be divided among family members to keep or to be sprinkled or buried in several different places (i.e. with a first and second spouse).

***Are cremation societies the same as memorial societies?***

No. The most important difference is that memorial societies (now called funeral consumer alliances) are not-for-profit consumer groups which are democratically controlled, whereas direct cremation “societies” operate for profit. Many full-service mortuaries cooperate with funeral consumer alliances to provide society members with a range of funeral options. However, if there is no funeral consumer alliance in your area, you may find some of the direct cremation firms considerably less expensive than their competition.

***How do religious groups view cremation?***

Most religions permit cremation. Since Vatican II Council in 1964, the Code of Canon Law allows Roman Catholics a choice between burial and cremation. The Greek and Jewish Orthodox faiths oppose cremation, as do orthodox Jews and Muslims.

***How to shop for a simple cremation***

All funeral homes are required to list a price for a simple cremation package, called an “Immediate Cremation.” This is cremation without any services such as a viewing or funeral at the funeral home. You can plan a memorial service at another time and location without inviting the funeral director. This also

gives you the option of hiring an out-of-town funeral home that might be significantly less expensive than your local homes. There can be a huge difference between funeral homes on the cost of a direct cremation. Therefore, it pays to shop around. All funeral homes are required to give prices over the telephone.

First, ask for the price of “a direct cremation with a minimum alternative container.” Then ask, “Does that include the crematory fee?” Then ask if there are any additional charges (such as for permits).

***Transporting Cremains***

Cremains may mailed or be carried by hand to another destination. If you are taking them on a plane you are best off leaving them in the box just as it comes from the crematory with the official documents attached. Security requires that they be able to be x-rayed so they need to be in a non-metal container.

***Additional Resources***

***Caring for the Dead: Your Final Act of Love*** by Lisa Carlson, Upper Access, 1998, 640 pages, \$18.

***A Family Undertaking*** by Elizabeth Westrate, Fanlight Productions, 2003, DVD. Rent from Netflix or purchase from Fanlight.

***Dealing Creatively with Death: a Manual of Death Education and Simple Burial*** by Ernest Morgan, Upper Access, 2000, 14th edition, 160 pages, \$17.

Order these books and see more at **[www.funerals.org](http://www.funerals.org)** or call 800-765-0107.

# ***Cremation Explained***



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