

Cremation Explained

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

What is Cremation?

It is 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 weigh about three to nine pounds.

Is there a trend toward cremation?

Yes. The percentage of cremations in the United States is rapidly rising each year because of the considerable expense of traditional funerals, the diminishing space available for cemeteries, and increasing environmental concerns. In a number of areas in the nation, particularly on the West Coast and in Florida, cremation is the preferred method of disposition.

Over 90% of FCA members throughout the U.S. choose cremation because they seek a simple, dignified and affordable option. In England and Japan, where cemetery space is at a premium, the cremation rate is also close to 90%.

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 some form of rigid container. Under the Federal Trade Commission Rule of 1984, all mortuaries must make available to the customer an unfinished wooden box or similar inexpensive cremation 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 fee for services may run well over \$1,000. If a visitation or a funeral service is held before cremation, the charges will be higher.

Many FCA affiliates offer members cremation services provided by licensed funeral homes at costs considerably less than the national average. Families who care for their own dead can use crematories directly at charges from \$100 to \$300.

Since 1984, all undertakers are required to explain the firm's charges in detail before a funeral purchase. You also may ask for these prices over the phone.

Do I have to hire an undertaker?

Possibly not. Most states permit religious groups or private citizens to obtain the necessary death certificate and permits for transit and disposition.

Is a funeral service necessary?

Although visitation and a funeral service with a body present may be held before cremation, many have found it more helpful to have a memorial service without the body present. It is less costly and family and friends will appreciate an opportunity to pay tribute to the memory of a special person.

Can a casket be rented?

In many parts of the country, mortuaries will rent an attractive 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. Significant savings may be realized by using a rental casket.

What can be done with cremated remains?

Several choices exist: 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. In fact, new options are being offered each year, such as artificial reefs in the ocean into which cremated remains have been mixed.

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. Some churches provide niches within the church or as a part of a garden wall.

Earth burial can be in a cemetery, either in a regular grave or in a special urn garden. Many cemeteries will permit two or three containers in one adult-size plot. However, the family, if so inclined, can bury the cremains anywhere it wishes, with the property owner's permission.

Scattering cremains over some area that had significance to the deceased has an appeal for many and 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 should be processed by the crematory to reduce all fragments to fine particles.

Must an urn be purchased?

No. Crematories return the cremated remains in a metal, plastic, or cardboard container that is perfectly adequate for burial, shipping, or placing in a columbarium. The family may prefer an aesthetic or other appropriate receptacle. Urns usually cost in excess of \$150, but alternative containers are equally suitable.

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

No. The most important difference is that memorial societies are not-for-profit consumer groups which are democratically controlled, whereas direct cremation "societies" operate for profit. They masquerade as nonprofit by using "society" in their name and by charging a "membership" fee. (In fact, this what prompted us to change our name to Funeral Consumers Alliance. Many of our affiliates are doing likewise.)

Many full-service mortuaries cooperate with our affiliates to provide members with a range of funeral options. However, if there is no memorial society (or Funeral Consumers 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 some others. Here's what the Rev. Billy Graham had to say about the issue: "At the resurrection it will not make any difference whether a person's body has been buried or cremated. God knows how to raise the body, either in the resurrection of life or the resurrection of condemnation (John 5:28-29)."

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