

CREMATION

Frequently Asked Questions

This document was developed jointly by NFDA and members of the Funeral and Memorial Information Council (FAMIC)*. The FAQ is designed to give families key information about cremation.

What happens during the cremation process?

The casket or container is placed in the cremation chamber, where the temperature is raised to approximately 1400 degrees to 1800 degrees Fahrenheit. After approximately, 2 to 2 1/2 hours, all organic matter is consumed by heat or evaporation. The residue which is left is bone fragments, known as cremated remains. The cremated remains are then carefully removed from the cremation chamber. Any metal is removed with a magnet and later disposed of in an approved manner. The cremated remains are then processed into fine particles and are placed in the container provided by the crematorium or placed in an urn purchased by the family. The entire process takes approximately three hours. Throughout the cremation process, a carefully controlled labeling system ensures correct identification.

How hot does the cremation chamber get?

Although there are several manufacturers of cremation units, the optimum temperature range is 1400 degrees to 1800 degrees Fahrenheit.

How long does it take to cremate a body?

Cremating at the optimum temperature (1400 - 1800 degrees), the average weighted remains takes 2 to 2 1/2 hours. Several more hours may be required before the cremated remains are available to the family.

Are cremations done individually?

Yes. Laws require that only one casket or container is cremated at a time.

Is the body exposed to an open flame during the cremation process?

Yes, the body is exposed to direct heat and flame. Cremation is performed by placing the deceased in a casket or other container and then placing the casket or container into a cremation chamber or retort, where they are subjected to intense heat and flame.

When after death can a cremation take place?

Because cremation is an irreversible process and because the process itself will eliminate any ability to determine exact cause of death, many states require that each cremation be authorized by the coroner or medical examiner. Some states have specific minimum time limits that must elapse before cremation may take place. Your local funeral service provider can advise you of applicable regulations, if any.

Is any other preparation required prior to cremation?

It is essential that pacemakers and other medical devices be removed prior to cremation. They may explode when subjected to high temperature, which can be hazardous to crematorium staff and equipment. In addition, any special mementos, such as jewelry, will be destroyed during the cremation process. Anything you wish to keep should be removed by the funeral director before the casket or container is transferred to the crematorium.

Is it true that the bones are crushed after cremation? I've heard you don't get ashes back -- what do you get?

A complete cremation is a two-step process. Firstly, the actual exposure of the deceased to several hours of intense heat and flame; after which the remains are mostly ash except for certain bone fragments, then the entire remaining ash and fragment volume is gathered and run through a processor, creating a uniform powder-like texture.

Why is refrigeration of the remains necessary?

Due to the irreversible nature of cremation, most states require a waiting period before the actual process may begin. Refrigeration is the only alternative available, other than embalming, that will retard tissue decomposition. Refrigeration is a necessity that protects family and friends, the crematory operator and the general public from potential health hazards.

Is embalming necessary for cremation?

No. It is your choice. It may depend on such factors as whether the family selected a service with a public viewing of the body with an open casket, or to enhance the deceased's appearance for a private family viewing; if the body is going to be transported by air or rail, or because of the length of time prior to the cremation.

Is a casket required?

No. For sanitary reasons, ease of placement and dignity, many cremations require that the deceased be cremated in a combustible, leak proof, rigid, covered container. This does not need to be a casket as such. What is required is an enclosed, rigid, container made of wood or other combustible material to allow for the dignified handling of human remains. The type of casket or container selected is really a personal decision. Caskets and containers are available in a wide variety of materials ranging from simple cardboard containers to beautifully handcrafted oak, maple or mahogany caskets.

Are there special cremation caskets?

There is a choice of very affordable cremation caskets that are completely combustible. The selection includes options from a plain cardboard container to a hardwood casket.

Can a casket be rented instead of purchased when choosing cremation?

Many funeral homes offer a hardwood ceremonial casket for viewing or funeral services prior to cremation. The ceremonial (or rental) casket is specifically designed to provide a very aesthetically pleasing, affordable and environmentally prudent alternative to purchasing a casket for a cremation service.

Can I bring my own urn?

Yes — It would be advisable that you discuss this situation with your cremation provider prior to the cremation. The size of your urn will be of great importance if you plan to have your loved one's entire cremated body included in this container.

Can I watch the cremation?

Arrangements can usually be made through the Cremation Authorization Form for relatives or representatives of the deceased to witness the cremation.

Do all funeral homes and cemeteries have a crematory?

No - actually only a small percentage of cremation service providers have their own cremation units.

Is cremation a substitution for a funeral?

No, cremation is simply a method of preparing human remains for final disposition.

Do I have to make different funeral arrangements if I chose cremation?

It really depends entirely on how you wish to commemorate a life. One of the advantages of cremation is that it provides you with increased flexibility when you make your funeral and cemetery arrangements. You might, for example, choose to have a funeral service before the cremation; a memorial service at the time of cremation or after the cremation with the urn present; or a committal service at the final disposition of cremated remains. Funeral or memorial services can be held in a place of worship, a funeral home or in a crematorium chapel.

Can we have the service before or after the cremation?

It's completely a matter of family preference. Many times when a family is split regarding the decision to cremate, a compromise may be achieved by having a traditional service first - to be followed by cremation.

What can be done with the cremated remains?

With cremation, your options are numerous. The cremains can be interred in a cemetery plot, i.e., earth burial, retained by a family member, usually in an urn, scattered on private property, or at a place that was significant to the deceased. (It would always be advisable to check for local regulations regarding scattering in a public place.) Cremation is just one step in the commemorative process—the preparation of the human remains for memorialization. Today, there are many different types of memorial options from which to choose. Memorialization is a time-honored tradition that has been practiced for centuries. A memorial serves as a tribute to a life lived and provides a focal point for remembrance, as well as a record for future generations. The type of memorial you choose is a personal decision. The limit is set only by your imagination.

Can I scatter the remains on private property?

Yes, with permission of the owner.

What is memorialization for a cremation?

You might choose ground burial of the urn. If so, you may usually choose either a bronze memorial or monument. Also available at many cemeteries are cremation niches in columbariums. They offer the beauty of a mausoleum setting with the benefits of above ground placement of remains. Many cemeteries also offer scattering gardens. This area of a cemetery offers the peacefulness of a serene garden where family and friends can come and reflect.

What is a columbarium?

A columbarium, often located within a mausoleum or chapel, sometimes free-standing, either indoor or outdoor, is constructed of numerous small compartments (niches) designed to hold urns containing cremated remains.

If I'm going to be cremated, why would I want my remains to be placed in a columbarium, or interred or scattered at the cemetery? Why shouldn't I just have them scattered in the sea or in some other place of my choosing?

As long as it is permitted by local regulations, your cremated remains can be scattered in a place that is meaningful to you. This can, however, present difficulties for your survivors. Some people may find it hard to simply pour the mortal remains of a loved one out onto the ground or into the sea. If you wish to be scattered somewhere, it is therefore important to discuss your wishes ahead of time with the person or persons who will actually have to do the scattering. Another difficulty with scattering can occur when the remains are disposed of in an anonymous, unmarked or public place. Access to the area may be restricted for some reason in the future, undeveloped land may be developed, or any of a host of other conditions may arise that could make it difficult for your survivors to visit the site to remember you.

Even if your cremated remains are scattered in your backyard, what happens if your survivors relocate sometime in the future? Once scattered, cremated remains cannot easily be collected back up. Having your remains placed, interred or scattered on a cemetery's grounds ensures that future generations will have a place to go to remember. If remains are scattered somewhere outside the cemetery, many cemeteries will allow you to place a memorial of some type on the cemetery grounds, so survivors have a place to visit that will always be maintained and preserved.

Why is having a place to visit so important?

Because it provides a focal point for memorializing the deceased. To remember, and be remembered, are natural human needs. Throughout human history, memorialization of the dead has been a key component of almost every culture. The Washington Monument, Tomb of the Unknowns and Vietnam "Wall" in Washington, D.C are examples of memorialization which demonstrate that, throughout our history, we have always honored our dead. Psychologists say that remembrance practices, from the funeral or memorial service to permanent memorialization, serve an important emotional function for survivors by helping to bring closure and allowing the healing process to begin. Providing a permanent resting place for the deceased is a dignified treatment for a loved one's mortal remains, which fulfills the natural human desire for memorialization.

If I were to be cremated, can I be buried with my spouse even if he or she was in a casket?

Yes — Depending upon the cemetery's policy, you may be able to save a grave space by having the cremains buried on top of your casketed spouse, or utilize the space provided next to him/her. Many cemeteries allow for multiple cremains to be interred in a single grave space.

Can I take the cremated remains home?

Yes. The remains are normally placed in an urn. Most families select an urn that is suitable for placement on a mantle or shelf. Urns are available in a variety of shapes, sizes and materials.

How big of a price difference is there with cremation compared to standard ground burial?

The cost depends on the type of permanent memorial, location of the memorial, urn and placement selected.

Do all religions permit cremation?

Some religions prefer cremation; some do not recommend the practice; most permit you to choose. Should you have any questions or concerns, we suggest you speak with a member of your clergy, or contact your local prearrangement provider.

*FAMIC is a membership organization comprising organizations in nearly all areas of the funeral service profession. Members include:

American Monument Association, Inc.

Cremation Association of North America, Inc.

Casket & Funeral Supply Association of America

International Cemetery and Funeral Association

International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards

International Order of the Golden Rule, Inc.

International Monument Supply Association, Inc.

Monument Builders of North America, Inc.

National Concrete Burial Vault Association, Inc.

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