

What is cremation?

Cremation is the process of reducing the body to ashes and bone fragments through the use of intense heat. The process usually takes from two to four hours. The cremated remains are then pulverized to break up larger bone fragments to a granular texture.

How popular is cremation?

The number of cremations in the United States has steadily risen from about 15% of deaths in the 1990s to almost 62% in 2024. Cremation is often chosen because it's more simple and economical, allows more flexibility in funeral and memorial services, or uses less of our land resources than traditional earth burial.

Which religions permit cremation?

Most religions do. Canon Law now permits cremation for Roman Catholics, but the remains must be buried or entombed, not scattered or kept. Muslim, Greek and Jewish Orthodox faiths forbid cremation, as do some fundamentalist Protestant groups.

Must I hire a funeral director?

In some states, only a licensed funeral director can arrange a cremation. But 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 casket required?

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 funeral providers must make available an inexpensive cremation container, often referred to as an "alternative container." Or you can make or furnish your own suitable container instead.

Can a casket be rented for viewing?

Many funeral homes will rent an attractive casket to families who want the body present for visitation or service before cremation. After the service, the body is transferred to an inexpensive container for cremation. Rental caskets can cost $800 or more, however, so you might consider using the less expensive alternative container and draping it with an attractive cloth, a quilt, or a flag.

Must I buy an urn?

No. Some funeral homes will urge you to purchase a decorative urn, but you may simply use the plain container in which the ashes are returned from the crematory. The cardboard or plastic container is perfectly adequate for burial, shipping, storing, or placing in a columbarium.

What is "Direct Cremation"?

With this affordable option, the body is cremated shortly after death, without embalming, viewing or visitation. If a funeral home is used, their charges will include the necessary paperwork, basic services fee, transportation, a container for cremation, and, in some cases, the crematory fee.

How much does cremation cost?

A reasonable price for direct cremation ranges from $1,000 to $2,000, depending on the region. Adding visiting hours, a funeral service, or casket can increase the price substantially. It makes no difference whether you buy a direct cremation from a funeral home or from a cremation-only business.

When a funeral home uses a third-party crematory, which is common, the cremation charge is usually between $300 and $400. Be sure to check if that charge is included in the quoted price for the cremation or if it's additional.

How do I "shop around"?

All funeral homes and cremation businesses must give prices over the telephone, or give you a copy of their General Price List if you come to the door. If your local Funeral Consumers Alliance publishes a price survey, you can easily compare prices for several funeral homes and make an informed decision. Likewise, before choosing a cemetery, you should call several and ask their prices for a gravesite or columbarium, and their charges for interring the remains or placing them in a niche.

What can I do with the remains?

You have a wide range of choices. They can be put in a niche in a columbarium, buried, scattered, or kept by the family. Cremated remains might be divided among family members to be kept, sprinkled or buried in several different places (i.e. with a first and second spouse). The ashes are sterile and pose no health hazard. Their disposition is generally not regulated by law.

■ Place in a columbarium

Cremated remains can be placed in a columbarium niche, often located in a mausoleum within a cemetery. As an alternative, you'll find that some churches



provide niches in a dedicated area inside the church or in a garden wall.

■ Bury in a cemetery

You could choose earth burial in either a regular grave or in a special urn section in a cemetery. Some cemeteries will permit two or three containers in an adult-size grave; others allow only one container per grave. Some (unnecessarily) require that you purchase an urn vault.

■ Bury on private property

You may bury the cremated remains on your own land, or on another's property with the owner's permission. If the cremains are to be buried other than in a cemetery, they should be removed from the container when interred. Keep in mind that unless you have established a family cemetery on your property, the land may be sold for other purposes, and the remains disturbed or rendered inaccessible.

■ Scatter on land

Some cemeteries offer sites for scattering, but you may disperse the remains almost anywhere as long as you are discreet. Scattering of cremated remains over an area with special significance for the deceased appeals to many families, and is legal in most jurisdictions. Although there are commercial firms who will scatter the cremated remains for a fee, most families want to do it themselves. Remains that are to be scattered should be processed by the crematory to reduce all fragments to fine particles.

■ Scatter at sea

Military personnel and retirees, veterans and dependents may have their remains scattered at sea free of charge by the Navy or Coast Guard. Since the ceremony will be performed while the ship is deployed, the family cannot be present. Also, many coastal regions have businesses that will scatter the remains at sea for you, or will rent their boat for a scattering ceremony. While federal regulations technically require cremated remains to be scattered at least three miles out from shore, the Environmental Protection Agency does not enforce this regulation with private individuals.

■ Keep at home

You might prefer to place the remains in a container special to the deceased, such as a hand-carved box or favorite vase, and display it on a bookshelf or mantelpiece. Or you could buy a decorative urn from a funeral home or cemetery; prices range from several hundred to several thousand dollars.

■ Other choices

Every year brings new ways of memorializing a loved one's cremains. Incorporating the ashes in jewelry, bullets, space rockets, coral reefs, or fireworks are among the possibilities. Check the internet for more details about these and other options.

How can I transport the remains?

Cremated remains may be mailed or carried by hand to another destination. For mailing, they must be placed in the US Postal Service's special "Cremated Remains" box and packed according to the written instructions. For plane travel, the TSA requires that the remains be in a container made of a material that can be X-rayed, such as wood or plastic. It is recommended that you carry the remains on board rather than checking them, to avoid the risk of damage or loss of the urn, and to bring along a copy of the death certificate and certificate of cremation.

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FUNERAL CONSUMERS ALLIANCE



Cremation Explained

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

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