

What is embalming?

Embalming is a physically invasive process, in which special devices are implanted and embalming fluids are injected into the body to temporarily slow its decomposition. The goal is to preserve the body to make it suitable for public display at a funeral, for long-distance transportation, or for medical or scientific purposes such as anatomical research. It also gives the body what some consider a more "lifelike" appearance, which some families want for a public viewing.

How prevalent is embalming?

Embalming is common only in the US and Canada. Many families consider it to be an essential part of a traditional funeral and burial arrangements, and few question whether it is necessary, or what is involved in the process. It is important to remember that this perception was created by the funeral industry for commercial purposes. Most funeral directors will not arrange the public viewing of a body without embalming and cosmetic restoration.

Do any religions forbid it?

Though embalming has no roots in Christian religion, it is neither discouraged nor encouraged. Muslim, Bahá'í and orthodox Jewish faiths consider embalming to be a desecration of the body, and prohibit it. Hindus and Buddhists choosing cremation have no need for embalming.

When is embalming required?

Embalming is rarely required by law. In fact, the Federal Trade Commission and many state regulators require that funeral directors inform consumers that embalming is not required except in certain special cases. Embalming is mandated by just a few states when a body crosses state lines or when the body is shipped by common carrier. Others may require either embalming ***or*** a sealed casket in those situations.

Does embalming protect community health?

Embalming provides no public health benefit, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Canadian health authorities. One state, Hawaii, even forbids embalming if the person died of certain contagious diseases. Many morticians have been taught, however, that embalming protects the public health, and they continue to perpetuate this myth.

In fact, embalming chemicals are highly toxic. Embalmers are required by OSHA to wear a respirator and full-body covering while embalming.

How well does it preserve the body?

Embalming does not preserve the human body forever; it merely delays the inevitable and natural consequences of death. The rate of decomposition will vary, depending on the strength of the chemicals and methods used, and the humidity and temperature of the final resting place.

Ambient temperature has more effect on the decomposition process than the amount of time elapsed since death, whether or not a body has been embalmed. In a sealed casket in above-ground entombment in a warm climate, a body will decompose very rapidly.

Why is embalming promoted?

The funeral industry promotes embalming and viewing as a way to show "proper respect for the body," and to establish the "clear identity" of the corpse so that the reality of death cannot be denied by those who view the body. Many funeral directors believe that seeing the body is a necessary part of the grieving process, even if the death was long-anticipated. While some people may be comforted by "a beautiful memory picture," as it's called in the trade, 32% of consumers reported that viewing was a negative experience, according to one survey.

Embalming also gives funeral homes an opportunity to increase consumer spending (by as much as $3,000 or more) for additional body preparation, a more expensive casket with "protective" features perhaps, a more expensive outer burial container, and a more elaborate series of ceremonies.

> *"Embalming forms the foundation for the entire funeral-service structure. It is the basis for the sale of profitable merchandise, the guardian of public health, the reason for much of our professional education and our protective legislation."*
>
> *– From an embalming textbook*

Are there alternatives to embalming?

Direct or immediate burial, without embalming, must be offered by all funeral homes. The body is simply placed in a shroud, casket, or other container, and buried within few days, without visitation or service.



Refrigeration can be used to maintain a body while awaiting a funeral service or when there is a delay in making arrangements. Not all funeral homes have refrigeration facilities, but most hospitals do.

So, private or home viewing by family members and close friends can occur without embalming and is far more "traditional" than some of the services promoted by the industry under that name.

What is the embalming process?

- Rigor mortis (stiffness) is relieved by massage. Rarely, tendons or muscles must be cut for a more natural pose if limbs are distorted by disease, e.g., arthritis.
- Massage cream is used on the face and hands to keep the skin soft and pliable.
- Facial features are set by putting cotton in the nose, eye caps below the eyelids, and a mouth-former in the mouth, with cotton or gauze in the throat to absorb purging fluids. The mouth is then tied shut with wire or sutures. Glue may be used on the eyelids or lips to keep them closed in an appropriate pose. Facial hair is shaved if necessary.
- Arterial embalming is begun by injecting embalming fluid into an artery while blood is drained from a nearby vein or from the heart. The two gallons or so needed is usually a mixture of formaldehyde or other chemical and water. In the case of certain cancers, some diabetic conditions, or because of the drugs used prior to death (where body deterioration has already begun), a stronger or "waterless" solution is likely to be used for better body preservation. Chemicals are also injected by syringe into other areas of the body.
- The second part of the embalming process is called cavity embalming. A trocar—a long, pointed, metal tube attached to a suction hose—is inserted close to the navel. The embalmer uses it to puncture the stomach, bladder, large intestines, and lungs. Gas and body fluids are withdrawn before "cavity fluid," a stronger mix, is injected into the torso.
- The anus and vagina may be packed with cotton or gauze to prevent seepage if necessary. A close-fitting plastic garment may also be used.
- Incisions and holes made in the body are sewn closed or filled with trocar "buttons." The body is washed again and dried.
- Nails are manicured, any missing facial features are molded from wax, makeup is used on the face and hands, and head hair is styled. The body is dressed and placed in the casket, and fingers are glued together if necessary.

> *"I think the elaborate, expensive display of an open casket with all the makeup in the slumber room enforces the belief that the person is only asleep, and in my personal opinion would only help to prolong the stage of denial."*
>
> *– Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in "Questions and Answers on Death and Dying"*

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Embalming Explained

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

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