

What is a home funeral?

With a home funeral, family or friends take charge of caring for the body after death, either alone or with the help of a funeral professional. They might bring or keep the deceased at home, wash and dress the body, arrange for a casket or shroud, prepare the necessary documents, hold a vigil or ceremony, and/or transport the body to the cemetery or crematory.

Benefits

- **Traditional.** Throughout most of history, families cared for their loved ones at home and prepared the body after death. Every funeral was a "home funeral."
- **Economical.** By doing much of the work themselves rather than hiring a funeral director, the family often can save thousands of dollars.
- **Extra time.** Having several days—or even a few extra hours—gives mourners plenty of time to share memories, express their sorrow, and say final farewells.
- **Therapeutic.** Many participants say that gathering together to wash and dress the body and share a vigil can create a special intimacy that helps ease their grief.
- **More personal.** By conducting the funeral themselves and bypassing the usual commercial offerings, the family is free to create their own unique rituals to honor the one who died.

Legal requirements

In every state the next of kin has full custody and control of the body after death unless the deceased appointed another agent. But families are still subject to a range of laws and must research the legal requirements ahead of time. Examples are:

- **Funeral director.** Nine states* require a family to hire a funeral director to file paperwork, transport the body, and/or supervise the disposition of the body. In the remaining states, families may choose to do all or part of the process.
- **Embalming and refrigeration.** While no state requires embalming as a routine necessity, some states do require it in certain instances, and some have specific cooling or refrigeration requirements.
- **Death certificate.** A death certificate must be filed with the proper authorities within the first few days. After the medical professional signs the form, the family or funeral director can complete their section and file the certificate.
- **Transit permit.** A burial/transit permit is issued when the death certificate is filed at a town clerk, city registrar, or state vital records office, allowing families in eligible states to transport the body for disposition.
- **Cremation authorization form.** The crematory will require a cremation authorization form, which can be signed by next of kin, other agent, or in some cases, the deceased before death.

Steps to follow

Ahead of time—

1. Do research
- Find out if your state requires a funeral director
- Check state regulations about cooling the body
- Become familiar with all required documents
- Learn how to wash and dress the body

2. Begin planning
- Assign one person to coordinate all arrangements
- Contact those who might help

3. Go shopping
- Choose burial or cremation
- Find a cemetery or crematory willing to accept the body from a family
- Make or purchase a shroud or casket
- Gather home supplies

After death—

1. Begin preparation
- Contact appropriate authorities
- Inform family and friends, then the wider community
- Gather helpers
- Wash, dress and lay out or casket the body

2. Do the initial paperwork
- Complete and file the death certificate
- Obtain the burial transit permit

3. Hold a vigil
- Invite participants and guests
- Decorate the space
- Arrange for food, music, etc.

4. Schedule the final steps
- Schedule disposition at cemetery or crematory
- Plan a memorial service if desired

5. Finish paperwork
- File completed cremation or burial paperwork
- Obtain certified copies of the death certificate

Preparing the body

Although hospital or hospice staff can help prepare the body, family members usually know instinctively how to bathe and dress their loved one. The "Resources" section below can direct you to sources for useful information. Or you could consider hiring a funeral director to wash and dress the body and return it to your home for the vigil.

* *Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, New Jersey, and New York*



Steps include:

1. Gather supplies for washing, dressing, cooling, and casketing or shrouding the body
2. Prepare a table, massage table, or adjustable bed as a work area
3. Wash and dress the body, using recommended hygienic practices
4. Lay out the body on a bed or massage table, or in an alternate container or casket
5. Use open windows, dry ice, Techni Ice® and/or air conditioning to cool the body for up to three days

Holding a vigil

A home funeral allows you to spend several hours or days with the body of your loved one in familiar and comfortable surroundings. You could choose to hold a private vigil and/or welcome the wider community, whatever feels right. You could add flowers, candles, photos, and a few special mementos to decorate the room and honor the deceased.

Options during the vigil include:

- Sitting with the body and offering final farewells
- Reading sacred texts or poetry
- Praying or meditating
- Listening to or playing music
- Sharing memories and stories
- Gathering friends to decorate the casket or shroud

See FCA's brochure "How to Plan a Memorial Service" for ideas about readings, music, flowers, photos, and food.

Transporting the body

In most states you are permitted to transport the body to your home or to the place of disposition if you obtain the proper paperwork; be sure to have the transit permit, death certificate, and any other necessary documents with you. Usually the body must be transported in a closed vehicle large enough to accommodate a coffin-sized box or prone body. Using half a dozen helpers and a rigid container or board for a shrouded body makes carrying the body easier and more secure.

Who can help?

Many friends would be delighted to help with various tasks if asked. Church or other community groups may offer their support or a location for a vigil or memorial. A funeral director can perform part of the process—preparing the body, filing paperwork, or transporting the body, for instance. Or a home funeral guide or end-of-life doula could train you in proper body care, offer support and connect you to helpful local resources.

Typical costs

The "typical" professionally directed funeral costs $10,000 or more. A home funeral can cost as little as $400; this would cover a certified death certificate, shroud or simple box, ice for cooling, and gas for transport. Any burial or cremation costs would be extra.

Resources

- The "State by State Rights" page on FCA's website, funerals.org, lists restrictions on caring for your dead in the nine states that require the use of a funeral home.
- The National Home Funeral Alliance (NHFA) provides information about home funerals, including a how-to guidebook, community chats, webinars, and a directory of home funeral guides, amenable funeral directors and celebrants. See homefuneralalliance.org.
- The National End-of-Life Doula Alliance (NEDA) has a global directory to help you find an end-of-life doula before or after the death. Go to nedalliance.org.

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How to Arrange a Home Funeral

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