

PEACEFUL PASSAGE AT HOME
Caring for our own after death

Caring for your loved one after death

After the death everyone take a big breath. Be with the body and spirit of your loved one. There is no need to rush into anything. This is your time to slow down and rest in the peace and sadness of the moment.

Care of the body

Cool the room

Turn the heat off, put the air conditioning on, or open a window.

Cool the body

(See *Cooling the Body*)

Take off heavy blankets, cover body with a light sheet

Use “Techni-ice” gel packs. (Techni-ice can be ordered from Amazon.com. Make sure it is from Australia and **not** China, \$34.95 for 12 sheets.) Wrap individual frozen gel packs in pillow cases and place around the body: two under the shoulder blades, two under the kidneys, one on the stomach and one under the head. Place 6 unfrozen sheets in the freezer. After 3 or 4 hours rotate them out. After the first 24 hours the head and stomach can be stopped. Keep rotating the Techni-ice under the body every 8 to 10 hours for the remainder of the vigil.

You can also use ice/gel packs from a drug store. They must be changed more frequently than the Techni-ice.

Care of the body

- Elevate the upper part of the body with pillows or by raising the hospital bed slightly. This allows the blood to pool in the back body vs. ears and neck.
- Rigor mortis sets in 2 to 4 hours after death. Before rigor mortis you want to:
 - Close eyes – place a yoga eye bag over the eyes until closed or gently hold them down until they close. They may open slightly over time as the muscles in the face relax.

- Close mouth – Elevating the head helps. Wrap an ace bandage under the chin and around the top of the head to hold the mouth closed. It can be removed after rigor mortis sets in. As with the eyes the mouth may open slightly over time.
- Clean orifices – Bowels or bladder may release at death. Wearing latex gloves, wash the area well. Place a clean absorbent, water-proof pad under the body. Put on a “depends” or diaper for added protection if leakage occurs later. Some families prefer to place cotton balls, with vaseline and drops of lavender oil, in the anus and/or vagina.
- Wash the body – use warm water in a bowl with drops of lavender or other aromatic oil. With a wash cloth gently wash the face, legs, arms, hands and feet. This is more of a ritual cleansing although it is helpful to remove any residual bacteria from the skin. Pat dry completely.
- Dress the body – you may need to cut the clothing down the back to make it easier.

Prepare the room for a vigil or wake

(See *Holding a Vigil*)

- Remove medical supplies and equipment.
- Arrange photos, candles, incense, and flowers as desired.

Containers

Whether you are planning cremation or burial, for transporting, the body must be placed in a rigid container lined with plastic sheeting. A simple container for cremation, often called an “alternative container,” can be obtained from a funeral home for about \$100. It will be a strong cardboard box, sometimes with a plywood base and is designed to be destroyed during cremation. The top of the box is perfect for families to decorate during the home wake.

Caskets for burial or cremation can be homemade. (For cremation they must be combustible), or they can be bought from a funeral home. They are also available from retail stores.

Outer Burial Containers

Most cemeteries require that the casket be placed inside a concrete grave liner to prevent the ground from subsiding. Some cemeteries offer them for sale, but if not you must buy

one from a funeral director. In Massachusetts they cost anywhere from \$400 to \$1,000 installed. The best deal is almost always from the cemetery, if they sell grave liners.

"Burial Vaults" are more expensive, more elaborate grave liners that are usually sold by funeral homes. It is often claimed that they protect the casket, but there is no proof that they protect the body. All you need is a simple grave liner to meet the cemetery's requirements.

Cemetery charges for opening a grave vary considerably but will always amount to several hundred dollars, not counting lot and liner. Most cemeteries do not permit anyone other than their own staff to open or fill a grave.

Check with your cemetery about regulations regarding markers, monuments and plantings, and about the charge for grave maintenance.

Scattering, Burial, or Storage of Cremated remains

Once cremation is complete, the crematory will return the ashes, usually in a box. If you wish to buy an urn, you can purchase one from any funeral director. Cremated remains can also be kept in any container -- in a beautiful pottery vase, for example, or in a box or container that was a favorite object of the decedent. They can be buried anywhere, in or out of a cemetery, or scattered in a particularly loved place. Some crematories have "columbaria," or rooms with niches where ashes can be stored. There is no restriction on the disposal of cremated remains in Massachusetts, except when they are buried in a cemetery. In that case, you must present the cemetery with a certificate from the crematory stating that the burial permit and the medical examiners' certificate were duly presented.

Organ and Body Donation

Although organ and body donation do not, strictly speaking, come under the heading of caring for your own dead, they do provide an alternative to conventional cremation and burial. Most of us are aware that there is an acute need for organ donations, and that in losing one's own life it is possible to give life to others. If you wish to be an organ or body donor, contact a medical or dental school and ask about their donation program. The Massachusetts medical schools require the donation to be arranged by the donor personally before death, not by the next-of-kin.

Requirements of schools vary, but here are some questions you should ask:

- How soon after death does the school require the body to be delivered?
- Does the school arrange for transportation, and does it assume all or part of the costs?

- In the case of body donation, ask how long the body will be kept, and whether the body will be cremated, buried or returned to next of kin. Does the school provide a funeral or memorial service?
- What arrangements can be made if death occurs abroad or in another part of the U.S.?

There are some restrictions on the acceptance of bodies. Ask about them, and always make alternative plans in case the school is unable to accept the body.

Family-friendly Crematories

Rural Cemetery and Crematory – cremation \$340.00
 180 Grove St.
 Worcester, MA
 508-754-1313

Eternal Blessings
 Guilford, VT
 802-257-0969

Mt. Auburn Cemetery and Crematory
 Cambridge, MA
 617-547-7105

Family-friendly Funeral Directors

John Anderson – Anderson-Bryant Funeral Home
 Stoneham, MA
 781-438-0135

Peter Stefan – Graham, Putnam and Mahoney Funeral Home
 Worcester, MA
 508-754-1717

Dave Casper – Casper Funeral Home
 Dorchester, MA
 617-269-1930

*Peg Lorenz – Educator and Home Funeral Guide
 84 Hazen Road
 Shirley, MA 01464*

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