

*PEACEFUL PASSAGE AT HOME*  
*Caring for our own after death*

## **Cooling the Body**

If keeping the body at home for less than 24 hours, turning on the air conditioner or opening windows to let cold air in may suffice. However, if the vigil is to last a number of days, other means will be necessary to keep the body cool in order to slow down the process of decomposition. You can easily cool the body with frozen gel packs, such as Techni-ice<sup>•</sup>, or dry ice.

Embalming was used after the civil war, when it was necessary to preserve bodies and refrigeration or other cooling was not available. These days embalming is neither necessary nor required as there are more natural, less toxic, and effective ways to cool the body. In some states cooling the body after a certain amount of time may be a legal requirement.

- Gel packs that can be frozen, like Techni-ice, are an easy-to-use, reusable product that comes in flat sheets, a little smaller than the size of a pillowcase. You can order these from different suppliers and the cost is about \$35 for 12 sheets.
  - The main advantage is that you can have it on hand before you need to use it, and it is reusable by simply placing it back in the freezer. It is easy to place underneath a body because it comes in flat sheets, and if needed, the sheets can be cut to adjust the size.
  - To “activate” the frozen gel packs you must first soak the sheets in water, and massage them until they plump up, and then freeze them. When they thaw, you can simply freeze them again.
  - Gel packs are not as cold as dry ice and may need to be replaced more often than dry ice, but they can be handled without precautions, and you do not need to be concerned about freezing the body.

---

<sup>•</sup> “Techni ice” is a brand name of frozen gel pack we have found to be effective. There are other brands also.

- To cool the body, start with 6 frozen gel packs, usually placed in pillowcases. For the first 24 hours, replace them every 3-4 hours. After the first 24 hours, replace them every 8–10 hours for the remainder of the vigil, or as needed.
- Remove the frozen gel packs before cremation, or burial, especially if it is a green burial.
- Dry Ice can be purchased at many grocery stores or specialty vendors for about \$1 per pound. Observe the following precautions when using dry ice.
  - Never touch dry ice with bare hands; use thick gloves, a potholder, or a towel.
  - Make sure there is good air circulation since when dry ice evaporates it emits carbon dioxide, which can be dangerous to humans if not well ventilated.
  - Dry ice is too cold to be cut with a knife or saw. If possible, have the dry ice company cut in 1"–2" layers, otherwise smaller pieces may be created by dropping dry ice on the ground or by using a hammer to break it into smaller chunks. These can then be placed under the body in paper bags or pillowcases to make packets about the size of a paperback book.
  - Start with about 30 pounds of dry ice. Thereafter, you will need 10–20 pounds per day.
  - Place dry ice in a Styrofoam cooler since it can crack plastic containers. Do not set the cooler on wood or tile floors as these can be damaged by the extreme cold of dry ice.
  - Once you transfer a person to a casket, if you're still using the dry ice, use a moisture barrier such as a shower curtain between the dry ice and casket to help reduce any condensation that may develop. If the bottom of the casket becomes wet from too much condensation it could weaken its structural integrity. Remember to remove the shower curtain before the burial if it is a green burial.

Whether using the frozen gel packs or dry ice bundles, put them in a pillowcase or paper bag, and place under the body in these locations:

- each shoulder blade,
- the lower back and hips, and
- (for the first few hours) under the head and on top of the lower abdomen.

An alternate method is to place sheets of gel packs or dry ice under the torso starting at the shoulders and extending to the lower back with one small coolant on top of the lower abdomen.

The goal is to cool off the torso and internal organs, not freeze the entire body. The skin should have a little give to it when pressed. For small bodies, such as a child, frozen gel packs may be a better option so the body does not freeze completely.

Check the frozen gel packs or dry ice once or twice a day. Add more dry ice or change out the gel packs as needed. Be prepared to have someone help roll the body to the side when you check or replace the dry ice. Keep the head slightly elevated as you do this. Have a washcloth nearby, and protect the clothing and bedding with a towel just in case the movement causes a bit of fluid from the stomach or the lungs to exit the mouth or nose.

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

*978-425-6602  
[www.peacefulpassageathome.com](http://www.peacefulpassageathome.com)  
[info@peacefulpassageathome.com](mailto:info@peacefulpassageathome.com)*