

PASSING THROUGH OUR HANDS

Home Funeral Care Guide

Getting Started

There are several aspects to holding a home funeral. The laws of the state must be followed, the body must be cared for, and arrangements must be made with a crematory for cremation or a cemetery for burial. To find out what laws are required for your state

- contact your state's Funeral Commission
- Funeral Consumer Alliance, www.funerals.org, has local affiliate groups for almost every state that can advise you on state laws
- Lisa Carlson's book, *Caring for the Dead, Your Final Act of Love*

Preliminaries

- Plan on having up to 6 people to help move and turn the body as it is washed.
- Prepare the area in which to work.
 - Work area – create enough space to comfortably move around the body. Remove medical items and clutter.
 - Working surface – it may be awkward to care for the body on a regular bed. If you have a hospital bed or massage table, you will find that the height and width are more convenient, and easier on the back.
- Assemble supplies
 - For washing the body (use what feels appropriate to you): shower curtain, plastic sheet or large trash bag to protect the mattress if you're working on a bed; bath towels, face cloths, soap, wet or dry shampoo, bowl(s) to hold water, essential oils to add to the water, (cotton swabs or balls), rubber or latex gloves.
 - For cooling the body: dry ice; heavy cloth or leather gloves to handle dry ice; styrofoam or metal ice chest for storing dry ice; paper bags or pillowcases in which to wrap dry ice when placing under body.
 - For dressing the body: final outfit or shroud/wrapping that will be cremated or buried with the body.
 - For the vigil: special coverings or quilts to cover body during vigil; scarves or silk for creating a pleasing effect; flowers, candles, rosary, family photos, or other decorative elements; reading lamp with chair, inspirational literature and blank memory book or paper nearby.
- Purchase or make the burial or cremation box and decorate if desired. For transportation, rent or use a van, pickup truck, or SUV. (This may be done at any time before the death or during the vigil)

Beginning Awareness

- As we care for the body after death, we keep in mind that many cultures and traditions believe that the deceased is still close to us, although in the spiritual world.
- Take the time you need, up to an hour or two, to be with the deceased before notifying the proper authorities (have someone else call if needed).
- Note the time of death.

- You may prepare the space with incense, candles, flowers, and prayers (or other items you feel are important) before you begin handling the body.
- Feel the sacredness of what you are beginning. You could start with a ceremony that feels right to you, even just a few words to set the tone, such as
Bathing the body and caring for our own after death is an ancient, time-honored tradition. Countless people have walked this path before us. We honor those who have gone before, and ask them to assist us now in spirit as we care for our loved one. We ask our loved one to forgive us in advance for any awkwardness or clumsiness on our part. We ask that love and tenderness guide our hands. There may be humor, tears, and stories. We offer them in tribute to our loved one who lies before us. In washing our loved one, it's not that we're washing away anything dirty, rather we are washing away any lingering pain or suffering, we're washing away any regrets there might be, and we're performing our final act of caring for our beloved.

Preparing the Body

- Close the eyes and mouth before *rigor mortis* begins, generally within a few hours after death. This varies widely depending on individual variables.
- To keep the mouth closed, a scarf can be tied around the head; or prop a small rolled-up towel snugly underneath the chin and place a pillow under the head.
- If the eyes are not closed, you can close the eyelids with your fingertips and place an eye pillow, a bag of beans, rice or coins over the eyes to help them remain closed.
- If dentures were important to the look of the deceased, clean and fit in the mouth as soon as possible.

Washing the Body

- In some traditions it is customary to wash the body as a form of ritual. A thorough washing with soap and water may not be necessary if the deceased, for instance, was given a bath earlier in the day. You may want to create your own ritual process as you bathe the body, with or without soap, as you choose. There is no right way to do it. Let your personal preference guide you.
- Remove the clothing; cut off if necessary. Then cover the body with a sheet or towels to preserve modesty.
- If you decide to wash the body, have all the washing supplies at hand as it is best to work without interruption once you get started.
- If the body is on a bed, place a plastic trash bag, plastic sheet, or shower curtain underneath the body to protect the mattress.
- Before bathing the body place a folded towel under the bottom and slowly apply firm pressure just above the pubic bone to remove any remaining urine from the bladder. Then remove the damp towel.
- Use a gentle soap with warm water. One can sprinkle a few drops of essential oil and flower petals in the water.
- Below is a suggested order for washing the body:
 - wash the face and neck area, then dry (pat the body instead of rubbing, since the skin may be subject to tearing)
 - cleanse the mouth and teeth with cotton swabs, small rag, or moisturizing sponges for the mouth

- wash hair, if desired (using dry shampoo; or regular shampoo and water supporting the head off the end of the bed)
- wash the arms and hands (you may want to clean the nails).
- wash right side of the body, front and back.
- wash left side part of the body, front and back.
- wash the genital area (If you are not comfortable with this, a less intrusive method is to wet a hand towel and draw it back and forth between the legs once or twice, then powder the area. Or if the patient received a bath shortly before she died you may want to omit this step.)
- wash the legs and feet, then dry
- If there are open sores or wounds, cover these with gauze pads and then tape to hold gauze in place.
- After bathing is complete, a disposable diaper may be placed on the body before dressing begins, if there is a concern about leaking fluids. Usually this is not a problem.

Blessing the Body

- “Blessing for Washing the Dead” which is read in the video, is found in *The Pagan Book of Living and Dying: Practical Rituals, Prayers, Blessings, and Meditations on Crossing Over* by StarHawk. and M. Macha NightMare. This poem can be also read at www.passingthroughourhands.com.

Dressing the Body

- Cornstarch or powder can be used to ensure dryness of the body.
- Some traditions like to anoint or put oil on the body.
- Consider cutting a garment up the back to make it easier to put on the body.
- If the feet flop apart consider tying a scarf around the ankles or covering the lower half of the body with a quilt.
- Undergarments are not necessary and can be difficult to put on, but use them if you feel it is important.
- If you want to shroud rather than dress the body, encircle the body in several layers of cloth, a quilt or sheets.
- Apply makeup or nail polish, as you feel is suitable.
- A sheer gauzy scarf can be placed over the face or any part of the body to cover any unsightly wounds. This also helps viewers visually understand that the person has gone ‘beyond the veil.’
- Place a pillow underneath the head for a more natural look.
- A favorite blanket, quilt, or scarf can be used to cover the lower half of the body once the body is dressed.
- Arrange the hands in a pleasing manner, such as crossed over the heart, or resting on the belly.

Cooling the body

- Keeping the body cool is usually a legal requirement after so many hours. Check to see what the laws are in your state. You can easily cool the body by using dry ice. Starting with about 30 pounds of dry ice is suggested. Thereafter it is usually 10-20 pounds per day. Whenever the dry ice evaporates, that is the time to add more.

- Handle the dry ice with leather or cloth gloves and place it in a pillowcase or wrap it in a newspaper or paper bag before placing under the body.
- You can use a moisture barrier such as bubble wrap between the dry ice and casket to help prevent condensation.
- Dry ice evaporates; so do not enclose it in a plastic bag. Leave its container open so the gas can escape. And make sure a door to the room or window is left open for ventilation.
- Tuck the dry ice under each shoulder, lower back and thighs of the body. Some people use dry ice behind the head and on top of the belly.
- Check dry ice once or twice a day to make sure it has not evaporated. Be prepared to have someone help roll the body to the side when you do this. The movement could cause some bodily fluid leakage so have a face cloth nearby and remember to keep the head slightly elevated.
- Be careful not to freeze the body. The skin should have a little give to it when pressed.

Holding the vigil and displaying the body

- If you want to hold a vigil, it can be done with the body resting on a bed or placed in a coffin or even resting on a table. This is purely a matter of personal preference.
- Placing the body in the casket usually requires six people to lift the body, using a sheet or blanket.
- Plan in advance for moving the casket through doors, up or down stairs. Go through a dry run using the empty coffin.
- Arrange the body in the coffin and decorate in a way that feels appropriate or sacred to you.
- Decorate the coffin in any way you choose. Put personal belongings or notes in it if desired. You may also opt for a shroud or blanket for the body.
- Prepare the room for visitors. This could include flowers, greenery (rosemary, for example, is the herb of remembrance) candles, incense, essential oil in a diffuser. You might also want extra chairs, a reading lamp, music, sacred reading material, and decorative items like flags. It is also nice to assemble photos of the deceased and mementos of her life. Some of the latter can later be placed in the coffin if you desire.
- Viewing can be as religious or secular as you wish. The vigil or visitation can occur at the hours or days convenient for the family. It can be simple or elaborate to fit the personality of the deceased or the needs of the family.
- Invite and involve the people you want, who knew and loved the deceased.

Final Transport

- If the body is going to be cremated, check with the crematory to see what items should be removed (pacemakers, jewelry, for example).
- It would be best to arrange for a vehicle to transport the body well in advance. Family or friends can provide this vehicle, or a funeral home can be called on to assist in this, but they will usually charge a fee for this.
- Poems read during the video, and a larger print version of this document can be found on our web page at www.passingthroughourhands.com
- Directory of information and resources for home funerals, www.homefuneraldirectory.com
- Books containing additional information about preparing for home funerals
 - *Creating Home Funerals*, www.finalpassages.org

- *Crossings' Resource Guide: A step-by-step how to guide for home funeral care*, www.crossings.net
- *Living into dying: A journal of spiritual and practical deathcare*, by Nancy Jewel Poer
- For information about laws pertaining to home funerals in your state
 - contact your state's Funeral Commission
 - Funeral Consumer Alliance, www.funerals.org, has local affiliate groups for almost every state
 - Lisa Carlson's book, *Caring for the Dead, Your Final Act of Love*

VIDEO NOTES

During the filming of the video we wanted to be very honoring and careful of the person who played the part of our 'body.' So we were very gentle during the washing of the body, pressing on the belly and placing a rolled cloth underneath the chin in order to keep the mouth closed. You may need or want to be much more vigorous than we demonstrated in the video. Please use your own judgment. And always, always change anything you need to in order to make the process more comfortable to you when you do the actual work. Let your personal preferences guide you.