



# Veterinary Wisdom<sup>®</sup>

for practice teams

## Body Care for Your Clients' Pets

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I once worked with a seasoned veterinarian who confessed she was very comfortable telling her clients about their pet's medical conditions, even when the news was bad. But, when she had to discuss the options for body care after a pet's death, she froze. She simply couldn't find the words.

Helping your clients choose how to care for their pets' bodies is difficult for so many reasons. Honestly, there isn't an ideal solution. However, when your clients have a clear understanding of their various options, they'll likely know which one is most "right" for them.

Whenever possible, you and your clients should make decisions about body care prior to a pet's death. Understanding the costs and procedures involved with each option available allows clients to make more informed choices *before* the overwhelming emotions of grief set in.

Please realize that some of these body care options may not be available in your area. If this is the case, check with your local *human* cemeteries or crematories to determine if they can meet your clients' needs.

### Common Options

#### Burial

##### Home

If your clients live in a rural area or in a community that allows home burials, a pet's remains should be placed in a thick, tightly-sealed bag inside a container that can also be sealed. Then, the body should be buried in a cavity at least three feet deep. This depth and containment diminishes the likelihood that other animals will locate and/or dig at a pet's grave. The pet's grave should also be located well away from any water sources (Clients should think twice about burial in a garden or flower bed!) Check city/county ordinances to learn about the companion animal burial requirements of your area. **Cost:** Minimal, but can vary with containment choices.

**Note:** Pet owners are occasionally advised to pour anti-freeze on the ground during the winter to melt the ice and soften the soil for burial. Please do not recommend this technique! As an animal health care professional, you know anti-freeze has a smell and taste that is attractive to animals and is poisonous if they ingest even a small amount.

#### Cemetery

If a home burial is not possible, pet cemeteries can provide your clients with appropriate grave sites for their pets. Many pet cemeteries offer options ranging from simple burial to complete funerals. Many also provide various types of caskets within a wide range of prices. Most pet cemeteries will send a representative to pick up your clients' pets' bodies if your clinic prefers that assistance. You (and your clients) should visit any pet cemetery you choose to associate with to be certain it operates from the values and ethics you endorse.

**Cost:** Varies with customized items and arrangements.

**Note:** Encourage clients to ask about 'perpetual care' for their pets' graves. This ensures that the graves located in the cemetery will still be cared for if the cemetery owner dies, moves, or goes out of business. It also ensures that the land cannot be converted to residential or business property.

#### Communal

Some clients may tell you that, once the souls of their pets are gone, their bodies have little value. In these cases, clients may decide to allow you to care for their pets' bodies without ceremony, most often choosing 'communal' burial. Since the majority of 'communal' burials take place in landfills, you should be honest with clients, making sure that this option is "right" for them

**Cost:** Minimal. May charge fees for transport/disposal.

**Note:** Most pets buried in landfills are not mixed in with the garbage. Rather, they are brought to a separate area of the landfill that is set aside for animal burial.



(Photo from istockphoto.com/MichaelSvoboda)

## Cremation

### Individual

An individual cremation for a pet means no other animals are cremated with your client's pet. This way, your client can be certain that the cremains returned are definitely those of their pet. Clients may also choose individual cremation, but choose *not* to have their pets' cremains returned to them. If this is their wish, be sure to ask the crematory operator what is done with unreturned cremains. Explaining this option thoroughly and honestly ensures that the solution is acceptable to your clients.

If clients choose to have their pets' cremains returned to them, you might suggest they select an urn or other special container in which to permanently place their pets' cremains. Or you may suggest that they ceremonially bury or scatter their pets' cremains somewhere that their pets enjoyed. Almost anything your clients might feel moved to do with their pets' cremains is acceptable, as long as it helps them move through their grief process. For instance, one teenage girl kept her cat's cremains in a mayonnaise jar beside her bed because that's her cat always slept there at night. Another middle-aged woman kept her dog's cremains in the glove compartment of her car because her dog loved to ride in the car.

**Cost:** Anywhere from \$30.00 to \$300.00+ depending on the weight of the animal, container, area of country, etc.

**Note:** Many crematories allow families to be present while their pets are being cremated. If your clients think being present would comfort them, please don't discourage them from doing so. However, *do* encourage them to visit the site, ask lots of questions about the process, and perhaps even witness a cremation before choosing to be there. The cremation process creates a dramatic transformation of a pet's body and clients should be prepared for the overwhelming emotional response this transformation can trigger.

### Communal

If your clients don't feel the need to have their pets cremated individually or to have the cremains returned to them, they may choose communal cremation. With this process, several pets are cremated together and the cremains are either kept or disposed of by the crematory. **Cost:** Less expensive than individual cremation, but still charged on a fee-for-service basis.

**Note:** Crematories usually bury or scatter communal cremains on their grounds or in a natural setting. It's important for you and your clients to know their protocol, so please ask before offering this option.

### LifeGem

The LifeGem company turns cremains (carbon) into Memory Diamonds. The result is a real gemstone that can be made into jewelry. The process is primarily for human cremains, but can be applied to animals.

**Cost:** Can be quite expensive. Visit [www.lifegem.com](http://www.lifegem.com)

## Body Preservation

### Taxidermy

Taxidermy reproduces a life-like three-dimensional representation of an animal for display. Many taxidermy procedures involve removing the natural skin from an animal, replacing this skin over an artificial body, and adjusting the skin until it appears life-like. The modern practice of taxidermy incorporates woodworking, tanning, molding, and casting and requires artistic talent, including sculpture, painting and drawing. It is most often performed on fish, birds, and other wildlife specimens.

**Cost:** Expensive (\$1000s).

**Note:** Most taxidermists are reluctant to provide their services for companion animals.

### Freeze-drying

Freeze-drying is the same process applied to preserving food or purifying chemicals. It can preserve some individual characteristics like facial expressions that are not as possible with traditional taxidermy. While most people still view this as a morbid novelty, it is gaining in popularity. For pet owners, it is most often available through a local taxidermist.

**Cost:** Less expensive than taxidermy (\$100s rather than \$1000s). To read more about this option visit [www.associatedcontent.com/article/417224/freeze-dry-pet-preservation-an-option.html](http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/417224/freeze-dry-pet-preservation-an-option.html)

**Note:** The process of freeze-drying an animal typically takes weeks to months to complete and can be less effective with overweight animals. It also requires clients to ship their pet's body, along with a photo of the pet, to the provider of the service. Guide clients to be certain they are working with a reputable business and to determine their recourse should they be dissatisfied with the results.

### Rendering

When large animals die, it is very difficult to bury them and very expensive to cremate them, although it is possible. Because of these difficulties, many people send their horses, llamas, cows, etc. for rendering. Rendering can be thought of as a way to recycle animal bodies after they are dead.

**Cost:** Can be pricey. Depends on size and number of animals.

**Note:** Most of these businesses use animal bodies to make fertilizers, pet litter, etc. If this is not acceptable to your clients, encourage them to consider other options.

### Natural Recycling

In rural areas, when there aren't dwellings or water sources nearby, the body of an animal who has died—particularly a large animal like a horse, cow, goat, pig, mule, etc.—is often taken to an isolated site where nature (weather, scavengers, etc.) can be allowed to “take its course”.

**Cost:** None, except to move the animal's carcass, if needed.

**Note:** Ordinances regulating this option vary from state to state and it is not appropriate or, in most states, legal for the disposal of multiple animals.