



Body Care Options for Your Companion Animal

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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.

Choosing how to care for your pet's body is difficult for so many reasons. Honestly, there isn't an ideal solution. However, when you understand the various options, you'll likely know which one is the most "right" for you and your family.

Whenever possible, you and your family should make decisions about body care prior to your pet's death. Understanding the cost and procedures involved with each option available to you allows you to make more informed choices on how to care for your pet's body 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 wishes and needs.

Here are the most common options:



Burial

Home

If you live in a rural area or in a community that allows home burials, your 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 your pet's grave. Your pet's grave should also be located well away from any water sources. (Think twice about burial in a garden or flower bed!) Check your city/county ordinances to learn about the companion animal burial requirements of your area. Cost: Minimal.

Note: In the past, some pet owners have been advised to pour anti-freeze on the ground during the winter to melt the ice and soften the soil for burial. Please do not use this technique! Anti-freeze has a smell and taste that is attractive to animals and it is poisonous. Ingesting even a small amount of anti-freeze can cause an animal's death.

Cemetery

If a home burial is prohibited, pet cemeteries can provide you with an appropriate grave site for your pet. 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 pet's body if you need that assistance. Some veterinarians can make burial arrangements for you, especially if your pet is euthanized at your veterinarian's clinic. Regardless of who makes the arrangements, you and your family should visit the pet cemetery to be certain it is the "right" choice for you. Cost: Varies with customized arrangements. →

Communal

You may believe that, once the soul of your pet is gone, the body has little value. In this case, you may decide to care for your pet's body without ceremony and choose communal burial. Since the majority of communal burials take place in landfills, you should be sure this option is "right" for you and your family. Cost: Minimal. May be a fee for transport and/or 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.

Cremation

During cremation, a pet's body will be placed in a cremation chamber. This unit is then subjected to very high temperatures (1400-1800 degrees Fahrenheit) until the remains of the body are reduced to only the calcium compounds in the form of dust and bone fragments.

Individual

An individual cremation for your pet means no other animals will be cremated with yours. This way, you can be certain that the cremains returned to you definitely belong to your pet and only to your pet. You may also choose individual cremation and choose to not have your pet's cremains returned to you. If this is your wish, be sure to ask the crematory operator what is done with unreturned cremains so you can be certain that their solution is acceptable to you and your family.

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If you choose to have the cremains returned to you, you may want to select an urn or other special container in which to permanently place your pet's cremains. Or you may choose to ceremonially bury or scatter your pet's cremains in a spot your pet enjoyed. Almost anything you might feel moved to do with your pet's cremains is acceptable as long as it helps you move through your grief process. One teen girl kept her cat's cremains in a mayonnaise jar beside her bed because that's where her cat always slept at night. Another middle-aged woman kept her little dog's cremains in the glove-compartment of her car, still in the small decorative box in which they were returned to her. Her dog loved to ride in the car and she liked having him with her. Cost: Can be less than a hundred dollars for a small animal or several hundred dollars or more for a larger animal depending on area of country, container charges, etc. Many crematories charge according to the pet's weight, so a horse or livestock could be thousands of dollars. Be sure to do your research.


Note: Many crematories allow families to be present while their pets are being cremated. If you think being present would comfort you, please 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 somewhat dramatic transformation of your pet's familiar body. Be prepared for the overwhelming emotional response this transformation can trigger.

Communal

If you don't feel the need to have your pet cremated individually or to have the cremains returned to you, you may want to choose communal cremation. With this process, several pets are cremated together. Cost: Less expensive than individual cremation, but still on a fee for service basis.

Note: Crematories usually bury or scatter the cremains from a communal process on the grounds of their business or in a natural setting. If it's important for you to know their protocol, please ask before you choose this option.

LifeGem

LifeGem is a company that turns cremains (carbon) into Memory Diamonds. The result is a real gemstone that can then be made into jewelry, etc. The process is primarily focused on converting human cremains, but can also be applied to companion animals. Cost: Can be quite expensive. Visit www.lifegem.com for information. 

Alkaline Hydrolysis or Aquamation

Aquamation is deemed a more environmentally friendly, cost effective, and natural alternative to cremation or burial. There are many similarities to cremation like, you can choose between individual and communal options and the remains that are returned to you will be bone fragments usually in the form of a fine sand or ash. The big difference from cremation is that aquamation is the disposition of a body by water instead of fire. The process usually happens by placing a pet's body in a stainless steel compartment where water, heat and alkalinity are applied to the body to speed up the natural decomposition process. This is a relatively new method for companion animal body care and not every community will have this option. Be sure to do your research ahead of time if possible. Cost: Tends to be less expensive than cremation or burial in a pet cemetery.

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).

Note: The process of freeze-drying an animal typically takes weeks to months to complete and it can be less effective with overweight animals. It also requires you to ship your pet's body, along with a photo of your pet, to the provider of the service. Be certain you are working with a reputable business before you choose this option and determine your recourse should you be dissatisfied with the result.

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 reuse or recycle animals' bodies after they are dead. Cost: Can be pricey, depending on size and number of animals.

Note: Most of these businesses use animals' bodies to make fertilizers, pet litter, and other products. If this use is not acceptable to you, you may want to consider another option.

Natural Recycling

In rural areas, when there aren't dwellings or water sources nearby, the body of an animal who has died naturally-- 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". Be advised, however, that natural recycling should never be considered as an option for an animal who has been euthanized. In fact, it is illegal. Since the euthanasia drug in the deceased animal's body can be lethal for other animals who may feed upon the carcass, a safer method of disposing of the body should be found. Cost: None, except to move the animals 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.

For more information, visit the Veterinary Wisdom[®] Resource Center at www.veterinarywisdom.com