

Is Embalming a Necessary Part of the Burial Process?

Embalming isn't really necessary. In most cases it is more of an aesthetic issue than a public health issue.

John A. Gentleman Mortuaries and Crematory in Omaha, NE



Embalming is the process of preserving human remains for public display. It uses a chemical mixture, which is very toxic. This mixture delays decomposition and makes the body look more "natural" for a public viewing. However, embalming isn't really necessary. In most cases it is more of an aesthetic issue than a public health issue.

How did embalming get started?

Prior to the Civil War all burials were "green burials." This is because the process of embalming did not exist. Embalming began during the Civil War. When soldiers died on the battlefield they were often far from home. Embalming allowed a soldier's family to either come identify the body or be able to ship it home to be buried.

Ever since then, embalming has been a regular part of the funeral process. Embalming continues to preserve a loved one's body to allow for a viewing before a funeral. This gives families time for grieving and closure.

Isn't embalming required by law?

No, embalming is not required by law. Funeral homes may encourage families to embalm a loved one for a viewing, but it is within your rights to decline the process. As people move towards green burials this is happening more often. Funeral homes will likely ask you to sign something saying that you decline embalming, however.

There are some cases when embalming may be required to transport a decedent. If the decedent is being transported across state lines or out of the country, then it is possible embalming would be required. This depends on the requirements of the transportation company and the state or country involved. This is likely the only instance when embalming might be required.

What methods of preservation are possible in place of embalming?

If a family is not planning on a viewing, then there is no need to preserve a body prior to burial. This means that a family can still have visiting hours for friends and family but there would simply not be a public viewing.

A decedent's body can be preserved using cooling methods such as dry ice or Techni-ice or a refrigeration unit. This can still allow for a private family viewing to identify the body. If a family wishes for a public viewing, sometimes this can also be arranged.