

Death, Burial & Body Disposition

The Sanitation & Hygiene chapter's Tier 4 already debunks the biggest myth here (a body doesn't spread disease the way people assume) and stresses documentation. This guide is the practical layer underneath that: the legal paperwork that still applies, how to actually preserve a body without embalming, and the real rules around burial when a funeral home isn't reachable. The Act of Thriving names this directly as the one endpoint eldercare planning doesn't cover; this is that answer.

The paperwork still applies, even when normal life doesn't

A death certificate is required everywhere in the US, and someone has to sign it: the treating physician for an expected, natural death, or a coroner or medical examiner for a death that's sudden, violent, unattended, or where the person hadn't seen a doctor recently (the specific window varies by state, commonly around 20 days). Without a funeral home acting as the go-between, you'd typically present the case directly to the deceased's doctor, the coroner, or the medical examiner, whichever applies, to get the certificate completed. A **burial-transit permit** is also required before moving a body from where they died, obtained through the same office.

Northern Utah note: Utah's specific requirements

Utah Code § 26-2-13 requires the death certificate to be filed with the Utah Department of Health and Human Services within 5 days of death. A burial-transit permit is required before moving the remains anywhere. If burying on private land, the state's own guidance is to draw a map of the property showing the exact burial location and file it with the property deed, so the location stays known to future owners, heirs, and title searches, not just the people who were there.

Basic care of the body in the first few hours

Rigor mortis, the stiffening of the muscles, sets in roughly 2 to 4 hours after death and makes repositioning far harder once it does. Do this early, while the body is still supple:

- Gently close the eyelids by holding them down for a short time; if they don't stay closed on their own, a small weight (a folded cloth or a small bag of rice) placed over each lid for a while holds them shut.

- Close the mouth by gently elevating the head (a rolled towel under the chin works) or by wrapping a soft cloth or bandage under the chin and around the top of the head; this can be removed once rigor has set the position.
- Straighten the limbs and position the body as you want it to remain, arms at the sides or folded over the torso, while it's still easy to move. Once rigor sets in, forcing a limb into a different position risks real tissue damage rather than just discomfort.

Preserving a body if burial or cremation can't happen right away

Without embalming or refrigeration, real decomposition sets in within about 24 hours in a warm climate. Dry ice is the practical substitute: start cooling within 4–6 hours of death if possible, and get the body down to and held at 34–40°F. Done correctly, this preserves a body for roughly **3 to 5 days**, enough time to complete the paperwork above and arrange burial or cremation.

What	Detail
Dry ice quantity	Roughly 16 lbs per day for an adult body
Replacement interval	Every 1–3 days as it sublimates
Placement	Under and around the torso, wrapped so it doesn't contact skin directly
Before burial	Remove all dry ice first; it sublimates into gas and shouldn't go into the ground with the body

WARNING

Dry ice is a real carbon dioxide hazard, not just a cold pack

Dry ice releases CO2 as it sublimates, which can build up to dangerous concentrations in a small or sealed room. Keep windows open or the room otherwise ventilated the entire time it's in use, and never store or use it in a low-lying, enclosed space where heavier CO2 can pool.

Home burial: real, but genuinely state- and county-dependent

Roughly 30 states allow home burial in some form, but two separate layers of law apply, and both matter. **State law** decides whether a family can legally handle the death, permits, and burial at all without a funeral director, Indiana, for example, effectively requires burial in a licensed cemetery, while Texas, Vermont,

Colorado, Montana, Maine, Oregon, and Washington are cited as some of the more clearly permissive states. **Local zoning**, a separate layer even in a permissive state, governs the specific parcel: setback distance from a neighbor's property, minimum burial depth (commonly 3–5 feet), and distance from any water source, since a shallow or poorly sited grave is a real groundwater contamination risk, not just a formality. Check your specific state and county before assuming either layer is settled by the other.

WARNING**Document the location, or the burial itself becomes the family's next problem**

An unrecorded burial site is a real, recurring problem for the next generation: heirs who don't know a grave is there, a future sale that surfaces remains during construction, a title search with no record of what the land actually contains. Map it and file that map with the property deed, exactly as Utah's own guidance above describes, regardless of which state you're in.

What doesn't need to be feared

The common assumption that unburied bodies cause epidemics is largely a myth the World Health Organization and the Red Cross have specifically and repeatedly corrected: someone who died from trauma, drowning, or the disaster itself doesn't generally carry organisms that pose a public health risk, and survivors moving through the same area are a bigger disease vector than the deceased are. The real exception is a death from a communicable disease already spreading through the community, where standard precautions genuinely do matter. What actually causes lasting harm in the historical record isn't disease, it's undocumented, rushed mass burial: grieving families who never get closure, and estates, insurance claims, and legal processes that stall for years without a death record to point to.

Grief, and coordinating beyond your own household

The mechanics above are only part of this. See the Mental Health chapter's grief-support guidance for the part that isn't paperwork, and if a community structure already exists, coordinate through it rather than improvising alone, exactly as this chapter's own Tier 4 guidance on handling a death recommends: consistent documentation practice across every household matters more than any one family's choices in isolation.

Sources

- Death certificate signing authority, physician versus coroner/medical examiner: College of American Pathologists; home funeral death-certificate process: Nolo
- Home burial legality by state, the state-law versus local-zoning distinction: Funeral.com; National Home Funeral Alliance
- Body cooling technique, dry ice quantity, timeline, and CO2 ventilation safety: My Mortuary Cooler; Peaceful Passage at Home
- Utah death certificate filing deadline (Utah Code § 26-2-13), burial-transit permit, and recording a private burial site: Nolo; LegalClarity
- WHO and Red Cross guidance correcting the dead-bodies-cause-epidemics myth: World Health Organization and International Committee of the Red Cross, management of dead bodies after disasters (field guidance)
- Basic body care and positioning before rigor mortis: Peaceful Passage at Home; Titan Casket