

How Is It Done?

In essence, modern embalming is akin to an exchange of blood for embalming solution, facial features are posed pleasantly and naturally, an artery is accessed, then disinfecting and preserving fluids are distributed through the vascular system. The organs of the thoracic, abdominal and pelvic cavities are treated directly with a specially formulated fluid injected through a small incision in the abdomen. The incisions are closed and sealed, and the body and hair are washed. At all times the deceased is treated with respect and dignity.

By the end of this process the main aims of embalming have been achieved:

The body is sanitised. Micro-organisms are rendered harmless, making the person safe to touch.

The body is preserved. Decomposition is halted for a while, enabling arrangements to be made and allowing time for the family to gather for the funeral.

The body is well presented. The person can be dressed in their own clothes, have their hair styled, and their natural colour restored.

If the person looks as good as possible (allowing for the fact of death), their family is left with a much better 'memory picture' than they might otherwise have. People have found this to be very helpful in the longer term for their emotional wellbeing.

Embalmers are skilled and qualified people, working within the Codes of Ethics and Codes of Professional Conduct to standards set by the NZEA and the Funeral Directors Association. They are required to keep up with innovations and development in embalming techniques.

By caring for the dead we care for the living.

People grieve well if they have time to say goodbye and the opportunity to see the person who has died. Embalming makes all that possible.



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Embalming

An informative guide



Why Embalm?

In New Zealand culture, when someone dies, we need to say goodbye. That farewell may take many forms – a funeral services, a Tangihanga, a wake, a quiet gathering of friends.

When this happens, many of the people closely involved find it very helpful to spend time saying goodbye.

Viewing a person that looks at peace and natural, particularly if they have suffered in death, can be a great comfort to families mourning the loss of someone close.

To ensure that family and friends can have safe access and a positive experience, a body must be embalmed – sanitised, preserved and presented naturally – because nature begins to take its course very soon after death.

The effects of long-term use of medications, viral and bacterial infections, or post mortem investigations can cause extreme conditions within the body, and may result in rapid decomposition.

Embalming enables everyone connected with the funeral – family, friends and professionals – to take part in farewell rituals with no unpleasantness or embarrassment, and without risk to their health.



Frequently Asked Questions

Is Embalming Compulsory?

No, however if a body is being repatriated to another country it may be a requirement of the airline. Otherwise it is the recommended way of holding someone until the time of their funeral. Refrigeration (when available) is possible, but it may cause dehydration and discolouration, and it will not minimise the rise of infection to those coming into contact with the deceased.

How Long Does it Take?

Anywhere between two and six hours, depending on the condition of the body, and the requirements of the family. In some cases it may be necessary to extend the embalming procedure over several days, especially if reconstruction is required.

What Happens After a Post Mortem (Autopsy)?

In cases of a sudden or unexplained death a post mortem examination is carried out by a pathologist under the jurisdiction of a Coroner. Vital organs are examined and small tissue samples taken for later study. Unless permission has been given by the family for them to be retained, all other body parts are returned. After the body is released to the funeral director of the family's choice, the pathologist's incisions are reopened, and each area of the body is embalmed via the arteries which supply it. Vital organs are treated separately, and the incisions securely closed. Once the person has been dressed, there are usually no visible signs of the procedure. If there have been serious injuries, some rebuilding of facial features may be required – or the injuries can be covered with a dressing.

Can Family Members Participate in Preparing Their Loved One?

Not in the actual embalming procedure (and there are health & safety restrictions to being in a mortuary), but family members may, if they wish, dress the person, apply makeup, style hair and assist with placing them in the casket.



Does Embalming Cause Pollution of Burial Grounds or the Atmosphere?

Aldehydes (the principal active ingredient of most embalming fluids) consist of carbon, oxygen and hydrogen – common elements of many substances. They are neutralised on contact with the soil, and during cremation they are totally destroyed, becoming carbon dioxide and water. Studies of ground water in cemeteries, and air samples from crematoria have shown that there is no cause for concern.

Are there Environmentally Friendly Embalming Options?

Yes, there are options that will cleanse the arteries and cavities.

The reason why many people reject embalming is that they are concerned about adding chemicals to the soil. What is overlooked in this case is that many toxic chemicals are used to prolong life and to ease pain. Not removing them is leaving chemicals in the body that can potentially harm the environment.

Where Can I Find Out More?

Contact the New Zealand Embalmer's (Inc) www.nzembalmers.org.nz or the Funeral Directors Association and or NZEA member.