



They say that **"Pain is a measure of happiness experienced."** This holds very true when speaking about the loss of a beloved pet companion.

Since the death of a pet can be one of the most difficult times in a pet owners life, we've compiled a list of question to ask Dr. Jocelyn Anne Mason, a veterinarian of 16 years, about the end-of-life issues of our companion pets and the options we have in caring for their remains. We hope this not only informs pet parents but also helps to destigmatize euthanasia and the processes that follow afterward.

Q1: If I choose cremation, what happens to my pet immediately after it is euthanized?

A: As a pet may release bodily fluids after passing, they are usually placed into a plastic cadaver bag for transportation to the crematorium. If this seems impersonal, you can ask your vet or pet crematorium about the option of a tastefully designed dedicated pet body bag, such as EUTHABAG, for your beloved companion. When euthanasia is performed at home, a pet crematorium can also pick up your pet, usually within 24 hours or you can make prior arrangements with the crematorium to have them picked up at a designated time although there may be an additional cost for this service. You can also ask your vet to take your pet back to their clinic where they will then be picked up by the crematorium. If you decide to use a mobile vet to euthanize your pet, they will often be taken to the crematorium directly or you can ask to do it yourself. If the euthanasia was performed at a clinic, pets are generally placed in a freezer and may remain there for a few days to a week, until the crematorium can arrange pickup.



Q2: What does the cost of euthanasia usually cover?

A: The cost of euthanasia typically covers the time the procedure takes, and medical materials used for the euthanasia such as catheters, disinfectant and syringes. There will be a cost for the sedatives given to the pet and for the euthanasia medication itself. If the clinic uses a designated body bag for all euthanasia, this may also be included in the cost.

Q3: Is there a toxicity issue with a non-cremated euthanized pet?

A: Euthanized pet remains can be poisonous and possibly fatal to other pets who ingest them. These poisons may persist in their skeletal remains for decades. Cremation addresses this hazard. Moreover, euthanized pets that died of a contagious disease should always be cremated. Some jurisdictions prohibit burial altogether.

Q4: What happens if my pet dies at home. Do I contact the vet, or do I call a funeral service directly?

A: You can do either. Some crematorium/funeral services deal directly with pet owners, while others only deal with a veterinarian. It should be noted that going through a veterinarian may increase your cost, as the clinic may charge a cremation fee on top of the crematorium's own fee. In these cases, it may be best to deal directly with the crematorium as they specialize in dealing with end-of-life care. They can pick up your pet directly from your home.

Q5: What is cremation?

A: Cremation is the process of reducing the body to ash and bone particles through the application of direct flame and intense heat (around 800 – 1,000 degrees Celsius). The ashes and remaining bone fragments - collectively known as 'cremated remains' or 'cremains' - are further pulverized, resulting in a white/greyish coarse sand-like powder which is poured in a sealed plastic bag, cardboard box, or tin and safely returned to the family.

Q6: What is aquamation?

A: Another alternative to cremation is aquamation also known as alkaline hydrolysis, water reduction or bio-cremation. It is the reduction of the body by a chemical process instead of a flame process. Water is heated to about 300 degrees Fahrenheit with a chemical called sodium hydroxide. The body is placed into the aquamation chamber that is sealed and the solution is added. Under pressure, the water is heated and the process begins to work on the soft tissues of the body. What remains after this process are bone fragments, which are dried and then further pulverized leaving the ash as a light sage or white color due to the retention of minerals and lack of carbon discoloration. Because the bone and ash need to go through a drying time, a day or two is needed before ashes can be returned to families (if desired). Just like with a typical cremation, ashes are poured into a sealed plastic bag, cardboard box, or tin and safely returned to the family.

Q7: What do I do if I want my pet buried?

A: If you want to bury your pet it is important that you check local bylaws, as it is illegal in some jurisdictions to bury a pet in urban or suburban areas. In the absence of specific local legislation, if you do decide to bury your pet, you should follow basic guidelines to protect human, pet and environmental health.

- 🐾 Place a layer of lime at the bottom of the hole and afterwards, on top of the body.
- 🐾 Ensure when digging a hole, that the top of the body is covered by at least two feet of soil. If this depth is not attainable, it is important to cover the hole with a large rock or wire to prevent scavenging by wildlife.
- 🐾 Buried pets must not come in contact with any surface bodies of water or groundwater including inland lakes, streams, rivers or open drains. Nor should they be buried in sandy soils, black land, rocky soil, flood land or around home foundations.
- 🐾 Pet graves must not be located within 200 feet of any stream or groundwater and must be at least 500 feet from any well used to supply potable drinking water.
- 🐾 Make sure to compress the earth and level the floor.
- 🐾 Finally, if you ever sell your property, it is important to notify the future buyers of the presence of any pets that may be buried on the land.

Q8: How does my vet select a crematorium?

A: Veterinarians may select their crematorium for different reasons. Some will select based on the ethical practices of the service, while others will opt for the lowest cost. This is a good question to ask your veterinarian, should you decide to work through him or her. It is also recommended to do due diligence and research local crematoriums. If you find one that meets your needs, you can either work directly with them, or request that your veterinarian use their service. There are also instances where veterinarians have their own crematorium on-site.

Q9: Does my vet need to complete the paperwork for the crematorium?

A: Usually your veterinarian will need to complete some paperwork or enter information via a web portal to be sent to the crematorium. This procedure depends on whether the owners go through their veterinarian or deal directly with the crematorium.

Q10: Can I take my pet directly to the crematorium?

A: Yes! In fact, it is recommended for the crematoriums offering direct client services. We recommend you call in advance.

Q11: If I want to pick up my pet's body and bury or cremate it on my own, how will it be prepared?

A: Procedures vary by clinic. Your pet can be placed in a cardboard coffin, a professional purpose-built pet body bag like EUTHABAG, a plastic cadaver bag or it can be wrapped in towels or a blanket. It is important to note that, since many pets may leak bodily fluids afterwards, they should be placed in a leak-and-tear proof receptacle that is easy to handle to and from a vehicle.

Q12: Can I deal directly with the crematorium my vet uses?

A: Yes, in fact, this is recommended as they are the specialists in dealing with after-life care. They have dedicated their lives to helping pet parents peacefully say goodbye to their beloved companions.

Q13: Do I pay my vet or the crematorium?

A: This depends whether you decide to leave your pet with your veterinarian or deal directly with the pet crematory. Ask these questions ahead of time so you know your available options.

Q14: What is my pet cremated in?

A: Most veterinary clinics and crematoriums still use plastic cadaver bags to transport and cremate pets. Although this may be distressing, some clinics have opted to use more respectful and purpose-built bags, such as EUTHABAG, to allow the pet to depart with dignity. It is recommended to check this information with your clinic or crematory service. Some, albeit very few crematoriums, may remove the pet from the bag prior to cremation.

Q15: How are cremations usually priced?

A: Some crematoriums price by weight, species or just by the service being offered. Inquiring ahead of time and taking care of billing prior to the euthanasia is recommended, to avoid additional stress during those final moments.

Q16: Does pet insurance cover cremation?

A: Some pet insurers will cover the cost of cremation along with an urn. It is important to verify with each insurer.

Q17: Define Private Cremation versus Individual/Partitioned Cremation versus Communal Cremation

A: Different pet crematoriums may define their cremation services differently. It is important to visit their website or establishment to understand the definition of their processes.

- Private Cremation.** The term private can be defined differently by each crematorium and is sometimes confused with individual. Typically, a private cremation indicates that the pet is cremated alone, with no other pets in the chamber. The ashes are then returned to the pet owner. However, the details are important to verify with your crematorium.
- Individual Cremation.** This term usually means more than one pet is placed in the cremation chamber and cremated at the same time with some form of separation between pets such as trays, refractory bricks, or space (thus the chance of ashes comingling is a possibility). The ashes will also be returned in this case. Again, this term can be interchangeable with private cremation. So, it is important to refer to the individual crematory's definition.
- Communal Cremation.** This means that several pets will be cremated simultaneously, with the cremated remains mixed together. The remains will either be buried or spread somewhere such as a cemetery, garden or another place unique to the crematorium. But, unfortunately, they may also be sent to a landfill.

Requesting this information beforehand can help alleviate your concerns or fears.



Q18: Can you witness the cremation?

A: Yes, usually. Most crematoriums offer what we call "Assisted Cremation" for owners who wish to accompany their companion to the end. In these cases, you, and anyone you wish to accompany you, will be brought to a viewing area to witness the process. This is becoming a more common practice, as many feel that witnessing is an act of closure that can advance the healing process. You may also request a visitation period prior to cremation. In this circumstance, your pet will be cleaned and placed for viewing, as with a human funeral.

Q19: Can cremated remains be divided?

A: Yes, they can. This option is frequently requested by families, siblings or pet co-owners.

Q20: Can toys and blankets or other items be cremated with my pet?

A: Occasionally, small items such as a plush toy, cards, drawings, notes or photos may be allowed to accompany your pet for the cremation. However, every crematorium has its own rules and it should be noted that the burning of such items can cause discoloration to the cremains.

Q21: Will the crematorium deliver my pet's remains to my house or do I have to go pick them up at my vet's clinic?

A: This depends on the arrangement between your veterinarian and the crematory. Some crematories will only deliver pet remains to the clinic (particularly if they have a working arrangement with the vet clinic). Others will deliver to your house via a courier service. Sometimes there is an additional charge to have home delivery.

Q22: How will I know I am receiving my pet's cremated remains?

A: Inquire about the traceability of your pet to ensure accuracy every step of the way while it is in the crematorium's care. Some crematoriums attach a bar code or metal marker to the pet's remains from the time it is received and throughout the cremation process. This marker is generally included in the cremated remains.

Q23: Can I purchase my own urn, or do I have to buy one from the funeral home or crematorium?

A: You usually have the option to purchase an urn on your own, or through the crematorium's supplier. Again, an urn may already be included in the cremation fee. Some crematoriums will also tell you that many household items can serve as urns.

Q24: Can I select my own urn?

A: Yes. However, an urn may already be included with the cremation fees. Most services offer a variety of options at an additional cost.

Q25: Are there other ways to memorialize my pet?

A: Yes! There are many ways to commemorate a pet these days. It is advisable to do your research prior to your pet's departure. It is not as stressful a time as after, and you can review your options and be prepared when the time comes. Some imaginative options include jewelry memorials, paw prints, clay paws and hair clippings as well as engraving options, such as military dog tags and glass-etched items. Trees can be planted in the name of the pet, and donations can be made to a shelter or university.

Q26: Do surviving pets grieve?

A: This is difficult to know for sure but some pets do appear to go through behavioral changes that could reflect stress, anxiety or a mourning period.

Q27: Are there any grief counsellors or support groups designed to help people deal with the loss of their beloved pet?

A: Yes! There are now many options available to grieving pet owners throughout North America and around the world.

- 🐾 Support Groups are popping up in numerous communities and may even be offered by your local crematorium, veterinary clinic or veterinary teaching hospital.
- 🐾 Online chat rooms and hotlines are also becoming increasingly popular.
- 🐾 Certified Pet Loss Grief Counselors have been trained to help and provide support and understanding during this difficult time. Sometimes it just takes a sympathetic ear to help us move on with our mourning.

Dr. Jocelyn Anne Mason suffered from compassion fatigue early on in her career after euthanizing many cherished patients in practice. She has lectured at universities on the emotional toll euthanasia can take on veterinarians and pet owners alike and is dedicated to providing helpful tools to veterinary teams to try and prevent mental health issues that are becoming so prominent in this field.

We thank her for helping to remove the mystery and stigma surrounding what happens to our beloved companions once they depart.

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