

Islamic Death Care and Funeral Guidebook

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Islamic Death Care Guidebook Overview

As in the case of all religions and belief systems, death holds a great deal of significance in Islam and is practiced diversely in the United States. Ways to care for and honor the dead depend on family traditions, individual religious beliefs, and situational circumstances. It is important that those who are practicing Islamic death care feel empowered to hold a funeral that reflects the wishes of the deceased and the family. Death care is highly personal and individualistic within Islam, and the diversity of the traditions are apparent in community death practices. It can be helpful to consult a local Imam, (religious leader of a mosque), or religious chaplain who can help connect those close to death and their families to resources for Muslims experiencing loss. A religious professional or funeral director can also help the family determine what kinds of personal elements they would like to include or not include in a funeral.

This guide is intended to be an overview of potential options and resources to help Muslims prepare for death, care for the body, plan a funeral, and process their grief and mourning. It is not comprehensive and is not intended to be followed exactly. Please feel free to take any parts that feel meaningful and helpful and leave behind those that do not serve you. The process of death can be an overwhelming and difficult time, and this guide is one resource intended to help people navigate it.

For more information on how to hold an independent or home funeral, please visit the Home Funeral Alliance at <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>.

Islam and Beliefs Surrounding Death

Islamic death care and funerals tend to emphasize the Five Pillars of Islam, which are core aspects of the faith intended to ground Muslims in their moral and spiritual life.

The Five Pillars of Islam are:

1. The Profession of Faith (Shahadah)
2. Daily Prayer (Salah)
3. Almsgiving (Zakat)
4. Fasting (Sawm)
5. Pilgrimage to the Mecca (Hajj)

The Qur'an says that death is a natural transition from this life to an afterlife and that it is part of Allah's will. The belief is that upon death, the soul separates from the body and is reunited with Allah in an afterlife. The Qur'an also believes in a Judgement Day in which the souls of those who have died will be resurrected and eventually ushered into a final and eternal afterlife with Allah. The Qur'an is an essential resource during times of loss as it offers words of comfort and support to those preparing for and experiencing death and emphasizes the natural inevitability of the end of life.

Resources For Islamic Theology on Death:

- <https://al-islam.org/resurrection-maad-quran-ibrahim-amini/death-and-its-hardships>
- <https://themuslimvibe.com/faith-islam/5-verses-from-the-holy-quran-on-death>
- <https://quran.com/al-anbya/35>

Preparing For Death

Redemptive Suffering

The suffering that is experienced at the end of one's life is sometimes thought of as redemptive suffering in the Muslim faith. Redemptive suffering is usually seen as a kind of atonement which allows one to demonstrate their faithfulness to Allah by demonstrating patience and accepting the suffering as a part of their divine will. Practicing redemptive suffering is also a kind of spiritual purification and can provide comfort to those preparing for death.

Sometimes, if someone is practicing redemptive suffering, they will request that certain medical interventions be avoided such as pain management medication and sedation. These requests should be granted to the best of the caretaker's ability.

Facing Mecca

The Holy Kaaba in the Grand Mosque is located in Makkah, Saudi Arabia and is the anchor of worship for Muslims globally. Muslims who perform the Salah typically face in the direction of the Kaaba as they pray. This acts as a symbol of global unity as well as unwavering faith and devotion.

During the end of a Muslim's life, they may request to lie facing the Kaaba. The person's feet should be pointed in the direction of Mecca with their head propped up on a pillow. At the time of death, the deceased should be moved to face Mecca if not already positioned to be.

Spiritual Care and Nourishment

The time before death is an important period of reflection for Muslims. It is an opportunity to think about the life one has led and make final amends with family, friends, and Allah. To support a Muslim who is near death, here are some examples of faith-based care:

- Wudu, a daily ritual washing (see resources below)
- Praying
- Reading and meditating on holy scripture like the Qur'an
- Consulting an Imam or religious chaplain

- Encouraging the person to speak about their hopes, fears, anxieties, and prayers for the transition to the afterlife

Some Muslims believe that one should recite the Shahadah (a declaration of faith) right before death. If possible, caregivers and family can assist the dying with reciting these words. See the resources below on specific information about how to recite the Shahadah.

At the time of death, non-Muslims may be asked to leave the room to allow for more intimacy and privacy during the passing. These requests should be honored if circumstances allow. Families may wish to recite prayers over the body which can be led by a member of the family or a spiritual leader.

Resources on How to Prepare for the Death of a Muslim and Provide Spiritual Comfort:

- <https://www.hpcoc.ca/end-of-life-care-considerations-for-muslim-patients/>
- <https://www.islamiclandmarks.com/makkah-haram-sharief/why-do-muslims-pray-towards-mecca>
- <https://www.mymasjid.ca/beginners-guide-learn-pray-salah/chapter-2/>
- <https://www.as-salaamfoundation.co.uk/5-duas-to-make-when-someone-dies-from-the-quran-and-sunnah/>
- <https://www.mypcnow.org/fast-fact/end-of-life-care-considerations-for-muslim-patients/>
- <https://www.crossroadshospice.com/hospice-palliative-care-blog/2015/october/13/the-culture-connection-muslim-end-of-life-practices/>
- <https://www.crossroadshospice.com/hospice-palliative-care-blog/2015/october/20/the-culture-connection-muslim-practices-at-the-time-of-death/>
- Information on Wudu:
 - <https://www.crossroadshospice.com/hospice-resources/spirituality-end-of-life-care/islam/>

Caring for the Body

Following the Death

After the moment of death, a close family member may close the eyes and mouth of the deceased. The body is also usually covered in a white cloth. Islamic law dictates that funeral arrangements should begin immediately after death. If arrangements have been made ahead of time with a funeral home, the director is usually contacted to come transport the body to the funeral home. If the family has made other decisions about where the body will be cared for until the funeral, they may want to make a transport plan ahead of time. For more information about how to care for the body in a private residence consult the Home Funeral Alliance Guidebook which can be accessed at <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>.

Islamic Burials

Islamic tradition historically does not allow for the body to be embalmed or cremated, and indicates that burial is the most appropriate option. Islamic law says that the body should be treated with the same respect in death as it was in life which translates to being buried in the earth. Islam also strictly prohibits embalming, viewing of the body, and autopsy (unless legally required) however, organ donation is permitted. Muslim burials are prompt and usually take place 24-48 hours after the death.

The Ghusl (غسل) and Kafan

Wherever the body is being cared for prior to the funeral, it is traditional that the family members who are of the same sex as the deceased will perform a Ghusl (غسل), or full-body purification. The Ghusl (غسل) signifies spiritual purity, dignity, and respect and is the final act of care for the deceased. The ritual may be led by a close member of the family, an Imam, or spiritual chaplain. Modesty and dignity are maintained for the deceased throughout the entire ritual. Refer to the resources below for specific step-by-step instructions for the Ghusl (غسل).

After the Ghusl (غسل) is complete, the body is wrapped in a plain, white cloth called a kafan (shroud). The kafan should be non-decorative and simple to symbolize dignity and equality in death. It also demonstrates that in death, all earthly

possessions are left behind. For men, the kafan consists of three pieces and for women it consists of five. The body will be buried in this kafan to allow for natural decomposition and the return of the body to the earth.

Environmentally Friendly Funeral Practices and Green Burials

Islamic burials are already very environmentally friendly due to the fact that bodies are buried in natural materials that decompose easily and are not embalmed. For more information on how to hold Islamic funerals that are environmentally friendly, consult the resources below on “green burials”. Combining green burial practices with the already eco-friendly Islamic traditions can be a meaningful way to honor a person who was fond of the environment and nature.

Resources on Body Care and Burial Practices:

- Ghusl, The Islamic Ritual Washing
 - <https://inelda.org/important-ritual-of-ghusl-islamic-washing/>
 - <https://www.mfs.asn.au/ghusl.html>
 - <https://nbc.org.uk/shrouding-and-washing/>
- <https://freeislamicwill.com/care-muslim-patient-after-death>
- <https://www.after.com/articles/do-muslims-believe-in-cremation>
- <https://fswbg.org/muslim-burial-practices/>
- Green Burials
 - <https://muslimclimatewatch.com/burials-islam-green-practices/>
 - <https://www.serenityridgemd.com/comparing-natural-burial-traditions-across-different-religions/>
 - <https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/plan-a-green-burial/>

Islamic Funerals

Funeral Arrangements and Attire

Muslim funerals tend to be fairly formal and are typically held in a mosque. Led by a local Imam, the congregation usually recites the Ṣalāt al-Janāzah which is a traditional Islamic funeral prayer. The prayer blesses all Muslims who have died and asks for them to be pardoned by Allah. The congregation is arranged to face the body wrapped in the Kafan which is in the direction of Mecca. Once all of the prayers are complete, the body is transferred to the burial site where those who wish to attend the burial will meet.

Unless the family states otherwise, guests can expect to dress modestly in dark colors. Women are typically expected to cover their heads. Guests may be asked to remove their shoes before entering the mosque or home where the funeral is being held.

Burial Proceedings

At the chosen burial site, the grave should be positioned in a way that allows the deceased to be facing Mecca. Additional prayers may be recited by the family as the body is lowered in the kafan. Usually, the grave will be lined with flat stones or wood in order to create a barrier between the body and ground. Finally, each mourner is expected to place three handfuls of dirt into the grave to symbolize the communal loss and effort.

Markings for the final resting place should be simple. A small, non-decorative stone is appropriate to indicate the grave. The simplicity in grave markings is symbolic and serves as a reminder that all are equal in death.

Resources on Muslim Funerals and Burial:

- <https://www.funeralpartners.co.uk/help-advice/arranging-a-funeral/types-of-funerals/muslim-funeral-services/>
- <https://muslimclimatewatch.com/burials-islam-green-practices/>
- <https://www.basicfunerals.ca/cultural-funerals/muslim-funerals>
- <https://www.econdolence.com/learning-center/religion-and-culture/islam/islam-periods-of-mourning?srsId=AfmBOooLSWh2gzTuEohn2-tv3ff7KvrwM8g6fZf2TDXuGbBk0ptrTZex>
- <https://www.amaacemetery.org/how-to-pray-the-janaza-funeral-prayer/>

Muslim Mourning Period and Grief

The way Muslim families and communities chose to grieve is extremely personal and should be tailored to best serve their individual needs. Some may want to be surrounded by family and loved ones while others might prefer private meditation and spiritual reflection. While there is no right or wrong way for Muslims to mourn their dead, Islamic religion has some traditions that are intended to support the mourners in their time of grief.

After the funeral ends, some mourners might want to hold a reception or continuation of gathering in their home. There, they may read the Qur'an together, pray, and share memories of the deceased. The community usually supports the immediate family in mourning by cooking meals or bringing food, helping with childcare, performing daily tasks like cleaning, and offering to listen and be a source of comfort.

The official mourning period usually ceases after three days, but some Muslims will continue to mourn for up to forty days. There is a special mourning period for widows which lasts for four weeks and ten days. During this time, she is to avoid interacting with any men who could be seen as suitors and to generally avoid contact with the outside world. Community members typically step up to help her perform daily tasks during this time.

To express condolences for the family, phone calls, visits, and cards are appropriate. Some families may wish to receive flowers while others will not, so checking before ordering flowers is a good idea. Empathic gestures, small acts of kindness, and a willingness to listen are all ways in which people can express support for a grieving family.

Resources on Muslim Grieving and Mourning:

- <https://raleighmasjid.org/basic-rules-of-islamic-funerals/>
- <https://www.amaacemetery.org/how-to-pray-the-janaza-funeral-prayer/>
- <https://www.econdolence.com/learning-center/religion-and-culture/islam/islam-periods-of-mourning?srsId=AfmBOooLSWh2gzTuEohn2-tv3ff7KvrwM8g6fZf2TDXuGbBk0ptrTZex>
- <https://yageeninstitute.org/read/paper/coping-with-grief-a-spiritual-and-psychological-guide>
- <https://www.empathy.com/funeral/muslim-traditions-in-mourning-and-grief>

Complete List of Online Resources

National Home Funeral Alliance

- <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>
- State Laws:
 - <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/state-laws>

Resources For Islamic Theology on Death:

- <https://al-islam.org/resurrection-maad-quran-ibrahim-amini/death-and-its-hardships>
- <https://themuslimvibe.com/faith-islam/5-verses-from-the-holy-quran-on-death>
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- <https://www.basicfunerals.ca/cultural-funerals/muslim-funerals>
- <https://www.econdolence.com/learning-center/religion-and-culture/islam/islam-periods-of-mourning?srsId=AfmBOooLSWh2gzTuEohn2-tv3ff7KvrwM8g6fZf2TDXuGbBk0ptrTZex>
- <https://www.amaacemetery.org/how-to-pray-the-janaza-funeral-prayer/>

Resources on Prayers

- <https://raleighmasjid.org/basic-rules-of-islamic-funerals/>
- <https://www.amaacemetery.org/how-to-pray-the-janaza-funeral-prayer/>

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- <https://www.econdolence.com/learning-center/religion-and-culture/islam/islam-periods-of-mourning?srsId=AfmBOooLSWh2gzTuEohn2-tv3ff7KvrwM8g6fZf2TDXuGbBk0ptrTZex>
- <https://yageeninstitute.org/read/paper/coping-with-grief-a-spiritual-and-psychological-guide>
- <https://www.empathy.com/funeral/muslim-traditions-in-mourning-and-grief>