

# **Sikh Death Care and Funeral Guidebook**

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### **Sikh Death Care Guidebook Overview**

As in the case of all religions and belief systems, death holds a great deal of significance in Sikhism 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 Sikh 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 Sikhism, and the diversity of the traditions are apparent in community death practices. It can be helpful to consult a local granthi, (a Sikh religious leader), or religious chaplain who can help connect those close to death and their families to resources for Sikhs 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 Sikhs 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/>.

### **Sikhism and Beliefs Surrounding Death**

Similarly to Buddhism and Hinduism, Sikhism teaches that death is a natural step in the cycle of life. Sikhism calls this loop *saṃsāra*, which is the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Therefore, death is not seen as an end, but as a transition period into a different life. Like Buddhists, Sikhs believe that every being has lived thousands of different lives in different bodies and realms and is reborn again and again. The kind of life someone will be reborn into is determined by the karmic merit accrued in one's previous life. Sikhs aspire to break the cycle of *saṃsāra* so that the soul will become free and the will be reunited with Waheguru, the divine. Before a soul can be liberated from the cycle, they may live in over 8.4 million forms, giving them many opportunities to practice becoming free.

Sikhs believe in living a life that will ultimately lead to being free from *saṃsāra*, and abide by certain values to do so. They practice non-attachment, humility and kindness for others, and avoiding the Five Thieves which are: desire, anger, greed, attachment, and ego.

While Sikhs do not view death as a tragedy, funerals are very important events as they allow for the person who has died to be honored while providing opportunities for the family to grieve. Death care for Sikhs are centered around values of acceptance, humility, and devotion to God. They prioritize creating an environment of simplicity, equality, and dignity around death practices.

Resources For Sikh Theology on Death:

- <https://www.directcremationservicesofvirginia.com/resources/our-blog/what-is-sikh-cremation-understanding-the-traditions-and-beliefs>
- <https://indianfuneralcompany.co.uk/understanding-death-in-sikhisms-core-beliefs/>
- <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/faqs/sikhism>

### **Preparing For Death**

While there are no specific rituals for how Sikhs should prepare for death, their religious tradition can help inform best practices for dealing with the transition. When Sikhs are facing death, they typically use it as an opportunity for reflection. Rather than expressing grief and sorrow, they will try to focus on the acceptance of death and their spiritual connection with Waheguru. They may do this by reciting certain prayers or studying specific teachings presented in Sikh scripture. They may also reflect on their lifetime and express wishes and hopes for their next life. Spending time with a person who is dying and providing comfort, empathy, and a listening ear are good ways to support them through the transition.

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

- <https://www.sikhdharma.org/sikh-death-ceremonies-and-protocols/>
- <https://www.sikhdharma.org/end-of-life-reference-guide/>
- [https://www.finaljourneyseminars.com/?page\\_id=475](https://www.finaljourneyseminars.com/?page_id=475)

## **Caring for the Body**

### *Following the Death*

After the moment of death, a close family member may wish to close the eyes and mouth of the deceased. There are few specific guidelines about how to care for a Sikh person who has died. Rituals are usually simple, respectful, and brief. Typically, after a death, the body is not moved or touched until the day before the funeral. Then, the body may undergo a ritual washing and the clothes can be exchanged for clean, fresh ones. Many Sikhs will transfer the body to a funeral home for preparation, but families may also want to prepare the body themselves in a family home or private residence. 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/>.

### *Ritual Washing and Clothing*

Regardless of if the body is in a funeral home or private residence, the washing should be done by very close members of the family who are of the same sex. The body and hair are washed with yogurt to soften and purify it before burial. This is followed by a rinsing with warm soap and water and the dressing of the body in clean clothes. The body will remain in the same location overnight until the funeral the following day. Before cremation or burial, if the person had been baptized, their body will be laid with the five articles of the Sikh faith called the karkars, which include:

- Kesh (uncut hair)
- Kangha (small wooden comb)
- Kachha (undergarment)
- Karha (iron bracelet)
- Kirpan (sword/dagger)

The body is usually surrounded with white and orange chrysanthemums.

### *Sikh Cremations*

While there is no rule against burying a Sikh person, cremation is the preferred choice. This is because the body holds no significance in the religion other than to house the soul. The person may wish for their ashes to be scattered somewhere meaningful in nature such as in a river. Sikh cremations are prompt and usually take place as soon as possible after the death. Because the body is not embalmed, the funeral arrangements must happen somewhat quickly to preserve the body until the cremation. There is not typically a viewing of the body before the funeral.

### *Environmentally Friendly Disposition*

Because Sikhs are not usually embalmed, they are able to choose a variety of environmentally friendly disposition options. Options like human composting and water cremation allow the body of the deceased to be converted into nutrient rich fertilizer. The fertilizer can then be used to grow trees, plants, and gardens or donated to conservation projects. Organ donation and the donation of a body to science are also meaningful ways for Sikhs to give to humanist causes. For more information on how to hold Sikh funerals that are environmentally friendly, consult the resources below on human composting and water cremation. Combining eco-friendly disposition practices with the Sikh faith can be a meaningful way to honor a person who was fond of the environment and nature.

### Resources on Body Care and Disposition Practices:

- <https://www.cpjfield.co.uk/planning-a-funeral/types-of-funeral/sikh-funerals/>
- <https://www.funeralpartners.co.uk/help-advice/arranging-a-funeral/types-of-funerals/sikh-funerals/>
- <https://farewill.com/articles/what-happens-at-a-sikh-funeral>
- Human Composting and Water Cremation
  - <https://recompose.life/our-model/>
  - <https://www.webmd.com/balance/what-is-human-composting>
  - <https://www.cremationassociation.org/alkalinehydrolysis.html>
  - <https://us-funerals.com/aquamation-or-resomation/>

## **Sikh Funerals**

### *Funeral Arrangements*

Sikh funerals have a very flexible and adjustable style which allows the family to hold a funeral best suited to their needs and circumstances. Before the funeral service, the body is usually moved to the family home so that certain prayers can be recited over it. This ceremony usually lasts around 20 - 30 minutes and can be led by a religious leader like a granthi or a member of the family. Afterwards, the body is transported to the gurdwara, where the funeral is held.

At the funeral, flowers are discouraged because the ceremony is supposed to reflect simplicity and modesty. The service is very short, typically only lasting around 20 minutes. More prayers are recited and respects might be paid to the deceased. Some prayers that may be included are a community prayer known as “Ardas” and two other daily prayers called “Japji” and “Kirtan Sohila”. The ceremony is very religious and therefore expressions of grief and sorrow and rituals like long eulogies are discouraged.

After the service, the body is again transported to the crematorium where the Sohila- a specific prayer said at nighttime- is recited. The prayer indicates the final resting of the deceased and asks Waheguru to release them from the cycle of saṃsāra.

### **Funeral Attire**

Unless the family states otherwise, guests can expect to dress modestly in white. All people who enter the gurdwara are expected to cover their hair. Guests may be asked to remove their shoes before entering the gurdwara or home where the funeral is being held. They will also be asked to wash their hands before entering the gurdwara.

### **Resources on Sikh Funerals:**

- <https://www.funeralpartners.co.uk/help-advice/arranging-a-funeral/types-of-funerals/sikh-funerals/>
- <https://www.cpjfield.co.uk/planning-a-funeral/types-of-funeral/sikh-funerals/>
- <https://www.dignityfunerals.co.uk/arranging-a-funeral/types-of-funeral/religious-funerals/sikh-funerals/>

### **Sikh Mourning Period and Grief**

There are no specific guidelines for how Sikhs should grieve and therefore it is important to cater to the needs and unique circumstances for each family. 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 Sikhs to mourn their dead, Sikh religion has some traditions that are intended to support the mourners in their time of grief.

After the funeral ends, the family and friends of the deceased may gather in a family home to read Sikh holy scripture, the Sri Guru Sahib. The reading of this text is called the “Akhand Path” and the text is read in a single sitting, usually over the course of three days. Sometimes the period is extended for up to ten days. Upon the completion of reciting the text, the family might return to the gurdwara for a vegetarian feast. Bringing food to the family during their mourning is a kind gesture, but keep in mind that the food must be vegetarian.

On the first anniversary of the death, the family might hold a celebration in which they gather the community to pray, eat, and celebrate the life of their loved one. At this gathering the Barsi prayer is recited which honors the deceased.

To express condolences for the family, phone calls and visits 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 Sikh Grieving and Mourning:

- <https://funeral.com/blogs/the-journal/akhand-path-after-a-death-sikh-scripture-reading-timing-and-what-it-means-for-grief?srsId=AfmBOorAXugBNSpFfQkxs8yOd8l-wF-ovkK9WkMepJ9VVXcnk3q32vic>
- <https://www.paulwilliamsfunerals.co.uk/funeral-services/religious-funeral-services/sikh-funerals>
- <https://www.talkdeath.com/understanding-the-sikh-tradition-of-akhand-path-a-ritual-for-processing-grief/>

## **Complete List of Online Resources**

### National Home Funeral Alliance

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

### Resources For Sikh Theology on Death:

- <https://www.directcremationservicesofvirginia.com/resources/our-blog/what-is-sikh-cremation-understanding-the-traditions-and-beliefs>
- <https://indianfuneralcompany.co.uk/understanding-death-in-sikhisms-core-beliefs/>
- <https://www.childbereavementuk.org/faqs/sikhism>

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

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### Resources on Body Care and Disposition Practices:

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- <https://farewill.com/articles/what-happens-at-a-sikh-funeral>
- Human Composting and Water Cremation
  - <https://recompose.life/our-model/>
  - <https://www.webmd.com/balance/what-is-human-composting>
  - <https://www.cremationassociation.org/alkalinehydrolysis.html>
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- <https://www.paulwilliamsfunerals.co.uk/funeral-services/religious-funeral-services/sikh-funerals>
- <https://www.talkdeath.com/understanding-the-sikh-tradition-of-akhand-path-a-ritual-for-processing-grief/>