

— FIELD GUIDE · THE FREE OPTION

Whole-Body Donation to Science

The lowest-cost, lowest-impact option — and the most misunderstood.

There is a disposition method that costs nothing, needs no casket, vault, plot, embalming, or fuel, and that leaves the body having contributed to medical education, surgical training, device testing, or forensic research. It is available in all fifty states, it has existed for centuries, and it is almost never discussed in the green burial conversation, because it does not fit the narrative of ecological products and nature-forward aesthetics.

Whole-body donation is the gift of a body to a medical institution or donation organisation. After use, which takes months to a few years, the remains are cremated by the receiving organisation and returned to the family or scattered in a memorial garden on the grounds. By most measures it is the lowest-cost and lowest-impact option available. And it is widely misunderstood.

What Actually Happens

MEDICAL SCHOOL ANATOMY

Many US medical schools accept whole-body donations for their anatomy courses. First-year students spend months studying a cadaver, learning three-dimensional anatomy in a way no textbook or simulation can replicate; despite advances in virtual anatomy, cadaveric dissection remains the standard. A body is typically used for one to three academic years, after which the remains are cremated and returned or interred in a memorial site the school maintains. Many schools hold an annual memorial for donors.

NON-PROFIT DONATION ORGANISATIONS

Established non-profit organisations accept bodies for surgical training, medical-device testing, forensic science, and anatomy education. What they do differently from medical schools is broker the body's use across multiple purposes: a single donation might have different regions used for orthopaedic training, device testing, anatomy education, and dental research. This is the part some families find difficult — the body is not kept whole. It is used as anatomical specimens distributed to different institutions, and whatever remains is cremated and returned or scattered.

FORENSIC RESEARCH

A small number of donated bodies go to forensic-anthropology research facilities, sometimes called body farms, where bodies are placed outdoors in controlled settings and studied as they decompose under varying conditions. The research helps investigators determine time and circumstances of death. It is the most direct ecological disposition — a body decomposing naturally on the earth while generating data — and, for people drawn to the idea of their body doing useful work, the most literal version of that.

The Cost

Zero. Transport, preservation, use, cremation, and return are all handled and funded by the receiving organisation, which funds its operations through fees charged to the institutions and companies that use the tissue, not to the family. This sets body donation apart from every other method: conventional burial runs well into the thousands, and cremation, composting, and aquamation all carry real fees, while whole-body donation costs the family nothing.

What a Family Does

Most programs encourage **pre-registration** before death — consent forms, medical history, your wishes — which does not commit you but eases the burden later. At death, the family **notifies** the program, which arranges **transport** at no cost, across state lines if needed. The body is **used** for its designated purposes over months to years, after which the remains are **cremated and returned**, typically within a few weeks of release, or scattered in the organisation's memorial garden.

Who Is Eligible

Not every body is accepted. Common exclusions include active infectious disease (such as HIV, hepatitis, tuberculosis, or prion diseases), extensive trauma or decomposition, and, for some programs, a prior autopsy. An important distinction: whole-body donation and organ

donation are different processes, run by different organisations, and generally mutually exclusive — if someone is a registered organ donor, organs are recovered near death for transplant, and the remaining body may or may not then be eligible for whole-body donation.

Common Misconceptions

“My body will be mistreated.” Reputable programs maintain strict protocols for respectful handling, and students are trained in the ethics of cadaveric study before they begin. **“I’ll end up in a weird experiment.”** Reputable organisations disclose the kinds of uses a body may serve. **“My family won’t get anything back.”** Remains are returned after use, usually as cremated ash; the timeline is longer than direct cremation, months rather than days. **“They sell the body.”** Non-profit organisations charge fees to the institutions that use the tissue, not to the family; the body is not sold in a commercial sense. Because less transparent operators have worked in this space, stick to established non-profit programs and accredited medical schools.

How to Sign Up

Register with an established non-profit donation organisation, or contact a medical school’s anatomy department directly and ask about its willed-body or anatomical-gift program. Pre-registration takes fifteen to thirty minutes, can be done at any age or state of health, is revocable at any time, and costs nothing. If a body is not accepted at the time of death, due to a medical exclusion or capacity, the family proceeds with an alternative plan — so it is wise to have one.

A NOTE ON THIS GUIDE

This guide is for general information and reflects conditions as of 2026. Legal status, availability, and costs change over time; confirm current details before making arrangements. Nothing here is legal, medical, or financial advice.