

# Care of Fetal Remains

Since human life begins at conception, the remains of embryos and fetuses must be treated with the same respect as the remains of other human beings. Such remains should never be spoken of or considered as “mere tissue” or “medical waste,” or treated in the same way as medical waste. The remains of embryos and fetuses should either be buried or cremated in a respectful manner and place. Cremated remains should either be buried or entombed.

Parents may wish to arrange for private burial and cremation with a funeral director, or may give the remains over for burial in a communal grave in a specially designated section of a cemetery. A health care facility at which the mother has been a patient during the miscarriage or stillbirth may be able to assist with these arrangements.

Families experiencing perinatal loss should be afforded all the services and support that would be offered for families who had an older child or adult die, including the proper care for and burial of their remains. Since in Iowa a death certificate is only required after the child reaches 20 weeks gestation, miscarriages require special attention in this regard. Unfortunately, miscarried children are often not automatically offered the same services as those children who are old enough to receive a death certificate. Therefore, in cases of miscarriage, more advocacy and guidance often need to be provided for families regarding obtaining and burying their child’s remains, as is outlined below.<sup>74</sup>

## OBTAINING A CHILD’S REMAINS AT HOME

When a miscarriage occurs at home, the remains of the child may be difficult to identify, depending on the age of development of the child. It is recommended that someone collects as much of the remains as possible, keeping in mind the following:

- The embryo will likely look like a large blood clot in the earlier stages of development and the child may not be easily perceived within the amniotic sac.
- It is not required to search through the amniotic sac to find the remains of the child specifically, although if the parents, a family member, or friend is comfortable doing so it can be done.
- It is important that any handling of remains should be done with proper bloodborne pathogen protections, i.e. nitrile medical gloves.
- Miscarriage collection kits are available at some doctor’s offices and hospitals or could be purchased online. Parishes could have some on hand for families who know they may miscarry.
- Place remains in a container with a saline solution and place in a refrigerator at home until burial and/or until they are transferred to the care of a funeral home. Ensure that the container will not leak, has a tight seal, and is in a place that it won’t be dropped or mishandled. A possible option to make the place of reservation of the remains slightly more suitable would be to place a lit candle near the refrigerator as a sign and symbol of the importance of the child’s remains.
- Remember that the child’s remains are likely very small and fragile and, depending on the age of development, may be imperceptible. A miscarriage can occur and resolve in a short time, but it can also take days. When the miscarriage happens over several days, this complicates the collection of the remains, especially when the child is in early development stages, because of the other biological materials that are also expelled over this period of time.
- If someone has had a miscarriage at home, it is important for them to seek medical assistance for follow-up to ensure that nothing is still present in the uterus which could lead to infection.

<sup>74</sup> For more on care of fetal remains, see: Ron Hamel, PhD, “Some Guidance on Disposition of Fetal Remains,” *Health Care Ethics USA* (2008); and Mercy Medical Center, Dubuque, IA, *Patient Care Services Policy Manual, Care of Fetal Remains/Products of Conception* (2014).

- Depending on the type of miscarriage and whether or not the fetus has been expelled from the uterus, a Dilation and Curettage (D&C) procedure may be necessary. This procedure involves the cervix being dilated by the doctor and the contents of the uterus being removed (this may include parts of the fetus, the placenta, etc.). This may be necessary whether the miscarriage happened at home or in the hospital. Some confusion surrounds the morality of this procedure as it is also used for certain types of abortion. If, however, a miscarriage has occurred and the fetus is deceased, this procedure is morally permissible and likely necessary to ensure the health and safety of the mother.
- Any remains obtained should be given a proper burial/cremation.

## **OBTAINING A CHILD’S REMAINS AT THE HOSPITAL**

When a miscarriage takes place at a hospital, or a D&C procedure is conducted after a miscarriage, it is important for someone to obtain the remains of their child for a proper burial/cremation. According to the Iowa Department of Public Health, nothing in Iowa Code prohibits parents from obtaining their child’s remains from a hospital. That said, some hospitals might have their own policies that would prohibit or dissuade parents from obtaining their child’s remains for Christian burial/cremation, especially if the child is before 20 weeks gestation. Even if a hospital does not have a policy against releasing the remains, they might not voluntarily offer the remains to the parents and might have the practice of discarding the remains as “medical waste.” Parents, therefore, ought to be advised to request the remains of their child and be provided with help, as needed, to coordinate with local funeral homes and cemeteries to properly bury or cremate the child’s remains. If hospital policy prohibits parents from obtaining the child’s remains for Christian burial/cremation, parents should contact the hospital legal department.

It would be beneficial for the local *Behold Your Child* ministry leaders to proactively contact hospitals to see if they have any policies regarding obtaining remains of miscarried children, especially those at very early gestation. Contacting local funeral homes and cemeteries to learn about and potentially help develop procedures for families who experience miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant loss is also highly recommended. For further guidance and support on these matters, or to share findings of local policies and procedures, please contact the Archdiocese *Behold Your Child* team.

*Important to note:* Some parents may come to this ministry after having had a miscarriage in which they were unaware that they could collect their child’s remains for burial/cremation and as such may have allowed the hospital (maybe unknowingly) to incinerate the remains with other “medical waste” or may have flushed the remains of their child down the toilet. This can weigh heavily on parents who may feel as though they abandoned their child, that they did not do the right thing, or regret the decision not to obtain the remains and have a burial and/or funeral for their child. It is essential to offer support for such parents in order to help them process their decision and identify what obstacles may have been present which hindered them from making a decision that they now wish they had made in hindsight.

## **BURIAL OF A CHILD’S REMAINS**

The child’s remains should be buried in a cemetery or cremated and interred in a mausoleum or columbarium. If the child is cremated, keeping ashes at home, dispersing the ashes, or making jewelry out of the ashes is not permitted according to Catholic teaching, so these should not be recommended. If appropriate, families should be counseled on what the Church teaches regarding the care for fetal remains, and why. This may be a difficult conversation to have, so it should only be done if the family is open to the discussion. If the family intends on keeping the cremains at home, spreading them, or making jewelry, etc. it may be advisable that such a conversation happens in the future rather than during the immediate grieving period. Regardless, ministers should not facilitate anything that is not aligned with Catholic teaching, but must allow families to make decisions for themselves.

Some cemeteries have specific sections for children who died before birth. It is in the best interest of parents who will experience this type of loss for *Behold Your Child* ministry leaders to contact local funeral homes and cemeteries in order to find out what services are provided in the case of miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant death. This will allow you to have the information readily available for parents immediately during/after a miscarriage or stillbirth. Families will often ask “What do we do now?” or “Who do we call?” Having accurate information for them right away can relieve them of an enormous worry that their baby will be cared for with dignity and respect once it leaves their sight.

Some cemeteries will allow families to bury their child on another family member’s plot. Inquire with the cemeteries if this is permissible at your local cemeteries. This can also alleviate the cost of purchasing a new plot or worrying that the child will not be buried with the family.



### **Burial at Home**

In the past, families would often bury the child’s remains on their own property, especially in rural areas. Important questions to consider regarding this possible option include:

- What happens if the family moves?
- Will the area be maintained in perpetuity?
- Is there a suitable place for the burial?
- Does the state, county, or municipality have any laws or regulations regarding such burials?
- Is it permitted in their area?
- Do the landowners need permission from government agencies?
- Reserving the cremains in a vessel that is placed on the mantle or on a shelf in the house is not in keeping with Catholic teaching, and so delicate pastoral care is essential in addressing this with families who choose to do so, to encourage them to consider burying or reserving the remains in a more appropriate place such as a cemetery.

### **Burial Vessels**

Depending on the stage of development of the child, different vessels can be used for burial purposes. Some of these items can be purchased in stores, including nice jewelry boxes (wooden, brass, etc.), online, or through a local funeral home or cemetery.

The following are some recommended resources for the burial of a child’s remains:<sup>75</sup>

- New Melleray Abbey in Peosta, IA offers small wooden caskets and urns free of charge, and they will ship them when needed to parents who have lost children. These also work for children in very early development. For more information, visit <https://trappistcaskets.com/>.
- CatholicMiscarriageSupport.com provides helpful guidance and recommendations on their “Caring for Your Baby’s Body” and “Burials and Names” pages.
- Heaven’s Gain Ministries has baby caskets (first trimester through infancy) and miscarriage kits available for purchase. To access their products and services visit: <https://heavensgain.org>.

<sup>75</sup> The Archdiocese of Dubuque does not endorse all the information, resources, and services listed on these websites.