



Questions for Organ and Tissue Donors

What is an organ transplant?

If an organ fails and cannot get better, this can be life threatening. An organ transplant replaces an unhealthy failing organ with a healthy organ. A transplant surgeon removes an organ from one person and places it in the body of another person. This may be necessary when one of the recipient's organs has stopped working properly because of disease or injury.

Not all organs can be transplanted. Organs that are most often transplanted include:

- The kidney, because of diabetes, polycystic kidney disease, lupus, or other problems.
- The liver, because of cirrhosis, viral hepatitis, hepatic tumors or fatty liver disease.
- The heart, because of coronary artery disease, cardiomyopathy, heart failure, and other heart problems.
- The pancreas, primarily in cases of Type 1 diabetes or for kidney transplant candidates who have end stage kidney failure and also require a kidney transplant.
- The lungs, because of cystic fibrosis, COPD, and other problems.
- The small intestine, because of short bowel syndrome caused by necrotizing enterocolitis, Crohn's disease, and other problems.

More than one organ can be transplanted at one time. For example, a heart / lung combined transplant is possible.

What is a tissue transplant?

Not all tissues can be transplanted. Tissues that are most often transplanted include:

- Corneas, in treating blindness or eye injury.
- Bone, in repairing fractures, in spine surgery and in repair following tumor removal.
- Tendons to repair sport injuries.
- Heart valves are used frequently in children to replace valves that don't work.
- Skin in treating burns and in wound repair.

Donated tissues can dramatically improve the quality of life for recipients and even save lives. In the case of tissue donation, potential donors are reviewed based on information like cause of death, evidence of infection and other standards. Tissue recovery must begin within 24 hours of death.

Unlike organs, cardiac, bone and skin tissues can be processed and stored for an extended period of time until the patients need them. Corneas are usually transplanted within a week to 10 days after they are recovered.

Tissue donation teams are in place in many regions of the country. In the NWT most tissue donations will be recovered by Alberta physicians with special training in tissue recovery.

Who can become an organ or tissue donor?

A person may be considered as a potential organ or tissue donor after he or she has died.

Not all people who have died can become organ donors. For example, if death occurs outside a hospital the person can't be an organ donor. Organ donation is only possible when the person has been declared dead and a ventilator continues to keep the heart beating to provide the organs with blood and oxygen until the organs have been recovered. However, it may be possible for the person to be a tissue donor, depending on the time and circumstances of their death.

Neurological death or "brain death" is usually diagnosed with a series of clinical tests that are performed at least twice by two different physicians experienced in the determination of brain death, and who are not taking care of the intended organ recipients. The tests can tell:

- if there is any ability to breathe without the ventilator;
- if the patient can respond at all to various stimuli; or
- if there is any blood flow to the brain (Brain Perfusion Scan)

It is important to know that once the determination of brain death has been made, the person has died. Brain death is a non-reversible condition and once determined, it is the legal time of death. The organ donor's body is then maintained on a ventilator until the organs have been recovered.

Tissue donations do not need the same conditions. The tissue donor does not have to be on a ventilator. Usually tissue donations can be taken within 12-24 hours after death.

What is a living organ or tissue donor?

A person can donate certain organs while he or she is still living. These people are called "living donors." Organs that are most frequently donated by a "living donor" include:

- One of two kidneys
- Two lobes of a liver
- Part of a lung

- Part of a pancreas
- Part of the intestines

Tissue donations can include amnion, skin and bones as well as blood, marrow, blood stem cells and umbilical cord blood.

How do I let people know if I want to be a donor?

The best way is to be registered through the “donor registry” in the province or territory where you live. In the Northwest Territories a donor registry is being set up so that anyone who wants to be a donor can complete an online registration.

You should also tell your family and friends of your wish to become a donor. By telling your friends, you allow them to support your family when the time comes and support is important.

You may also sign an “End of Life Wishes” form, which will be available to download on the donor registry site. Or you could complete an “End of Life Directive” and attach it to your Will. If you do either of these things, make sure you tell your family and friends.

How do I register to be an organ and tissue donor?

Until the NWT organ donor registry is fully set up you cannot formally register in the NWT to be an organ or tissue donor. However, you can still tell your family that you wish to be a donor and encourage them to respect your wishes and give permission for organ and tissue donations.

Are there reasons that people can't be organ or tissue donors?

People can be organ donors at almost any age. Tests are conducted to make sure the organs meet transplant standards. Livers have been successfully transplanted from 90- year-old donors and lungs, livers, and kidneys have been transplanted from 70-year-old donors.

People usually can't be organ donors if they have cancer or HIV. Sometimes people with brain tumors may be able to donate organs if the cancer has not spread.

Anyone 80 years old and younger can be a tissue donor. However people can't be tissue donors if they have certain diseases (e.g., HIV, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, and sepsis) or have been involved in certain high-risk behaviors such as intravenous drug use or risky sexual behaviours.

If I die in a community outside Yellowknife can my organs or tissues be donated?

If you die outside a hospital you cannot be an organ donor. However under some circumstances you may be able to be a tissue donor if your body is received within a few hours in a hospital that can recover tissue donations. This is evaluated on a case by case basis by clinicians.

If someone dies outside the hospital (e.g., nursing home, private home, at the scene of an accident), can the person still be an organ donor or tissue donor?

If death occurs outside a hospital the person can't be an organ donor. Organ donation is only possible when the person has been declared dead and a ventilator continues to keep the heart beating to provide the organs with blood and oxygen until the organs have been recovered. However, it may be possible for the person to be a tissue donor, depending on the time and circumstances of their death.

What questions will be asked after consent is given for an organ and/or tissue donation?

The donor (for living donations) or next of kin (for other donations) will be asked questions about the donor's medical and social history. A questionnaire is used (similar to donating blood) to make sure that the organs and/or tissues are safe for transplant. The questions ask about illnesses that the donor may have had or whether they were at risk for certain illnesses (e.g. due to a history of using intravenous drugs).

What if I choose to donate but my organs or tissues are not suitable?

If you or your next of kin make the choice to donate your organs or tissues and they are not suitable for transplantation, they can still be used for scientific research, if consent is provided by the family.

Can I donate my body to science and still be an organ and/or tissue donor?

If you want your body to be used for science (medical education or scientific research), you have to donate your whole body. This means if you donate your body to science you can't donate any organs or tissue (other than your eyes in some cases).

If you wish to donate your body to be used for medical education or scientific research, you must register with the anatomical gifts program closest to you. After your body has been used for medical or research, the remains are usually cremated and returned to the university. Final burial preparations are arranged with the next-of-kin.

For more information, contact the University of Alberta Anatomical Gifts Program.

As a donor, does my information stay confidential?

Yes. Donation information stays confidential because it is health information, and health information is protected by the NWT Human and Tissue Donor Act, the Health Information Act, and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

Is there a cost to donate organs or tissues?

In Canada, there is no cost to the donor or the donor's family for being an organ or tissue donor. It's against the law to sell organs or tissues in Canada.

How do families feel after a family member has donated organs or tissues?

Most families feel that the organ and tissue donation helped ease their grief. They know that they were able to give the gift of life to another person in a life-threatening situation.

Are there religious or spiritual issues around organ and tissue donation?

Feelings about organ and tissue donation are different for everyone. It's a very personal matter. Almost all major religious groups in Canada are supportive of organ and tissue donation. Talk to your religious leader or spiritual advisor if you have any questions.