Organ and Tissue Donation

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Tennessee Donor Registry

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Frequently Asked Questions About Donation

1. How can someone be sure that doctors and nurses will do everything they can to save them if they are registered to be an organ and tissue donor?
2. How can someone be sure that they will be dead when organs and tissues are recovered?
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9. Is donation emotionally painful for donor families?
10. If I donate my loved one's organs, will the recipients know who I am?
11. Can my family override my decision to donate?
12. Can an individual or families designate that donated organs or tissues go to a specific individual?
What is organ and tissue donation?

It's the process of recovering organs and tissues from a person and transplanting them into others in order to save or enhance lives. Up to eight lives can be saved through organ donation and up to 75 lives may be enriched through tissue donation.

There are two kinds of donation: living and deceased. Living donors can give a kidney, part of the liver, a lung or part of a lung, part of the pancreas, part of the intestines, or even a heart, as long as the donor receives a replacement heart.

Deceased donors can give any and all organs, as well as skin, bones, tendons and other structures that can save or enrich lives for patients in need.

How many people need donated organs and tissue?

There are more than 104,000 people in the U.S. waiting for organ transplants. Each year, about 6,000 people die waiting for a lifesaving organ transplant. However, each year hundreds of thousands of people benefit from donated tissue.

What organs are most commonly donated?

The most commonly transplanted organs are the kidneys, liver, heart and lungs. In recent years, doctors have been able to cure diabetes with a pancreas transplant or cells extracted from the pancreas (islet cells) that produce insulin. Although only a small number of intestinal transplants have been performed, this treatment holds great hope for patients whose intestines have been severely damaged through illness, trauma or birth defects.

What tissues may be donated?

Skin is used as a temporary dressing for burns, serious abrasions and other exposed areas. Bone is used in orthopedic surgery to help fractures heal or to prevent amputation. Healthy heart valves can replace defective valves. Tendons are used to repair torn ligaments on knees or other joints. Veins are used in cardiac bypass surgery. Corneas can restore sight to the blind. Many tissues that cannot be used for transplant can be recovered and used in research studies to advance medical science.

How can my organs and tissues be used for research?

Donated organs and tissues may be used for the purpose of transplantation or therapy. However, if the gift cannot be used for transplantation or therapy, the organ and/or tissue may be used for education and/or medical research. Researchers are making medical advances and finding new ways to treat disease by studying donated human organs and tissues that could not be transplanted.

What if I don't want my organs and/or tissues to be used for research?

The Donate Life Tennessee Registry allows you to opt out of donating organs and/or tissues for research. During the signup process, check the "Specify Donations" box. Do not check the "For Research" box under both Organs and Tissues. If you've already signed up online or with the Department of Safety, you may go to the registry website, click "Update My
Profile”, enter your login information and choose your donations. You may also change your password and personal information or remove your name from the Donate Life Tennessee Registry.

**Can I choose which organs and tissues I donate?**

When you check the "Specify Donations" box on the first signup page, the next page allows you to opt out of donating specific organs and/or tissues for medical research. You can also specify that your donated tissue must be used for life-saving or reconstructive purposes only; distributed only to nonprofit organizations; or distributed only in the U.S.

**If someone has been declared brain dead, is recovery possible?**

No. It is impossible to recover from brain death. Brain death is different from coma or persistent vegetative state. Death can occur in one of two ways: first, when the heart and lungs stop functioning; and second, when the brain stops functioning. Brain death occurs when a person has irreversible, catastrophic brain injury, which causes brain activity to stop permanently. Heart and lung functions can only be maintained with a mechanical ventilator.

**Can my family override my decision to donate?**

Once you've chosen to be an organ and tissue donor on Tennessee’s Registry, family members can't override your decision. Should you be eligible to donate, the recovery agency will show your family members proof of your registration. A family advocate from the recovery agency will help your family understand and go through the donation process. We recommend that you share your wishes with your family today to save them the difficulty of dealing with these matters unexpectedly.

**Can a person or family designate that donated organs or tissues go to a specific person?**

The national policy set by the United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS) is designed so that the sickest person usually gets a donated organ from a deceased person. Blood type and size also affect who will receive a particular donated organ.

The policy allows for directed donation, whereby an organ is designated to go to someone by name. The most common scenario is a directed donation to someone the donor family knows personally. Donation of an organ(s) cannot discriminate against a person or class of persons on the basis of race, national origin, religion, gender or similar characteristic. We do not favor one candidate over any other.

**Tennessee Donor Registry**

**Why register? Isn't it enough to sign my driver's license?**

A signed and witnessed driver's license or donor card does grant authorization for organ and/or tissue recovery, but it doesn't ensure donation. For example, a donor card or license may not be available when a family is approached about donation unexpectedly. Without documentation of a loved one's wishes, families often decline to authorize donation. By
signing up with the Tennessee Donor Registry through the Department of Safety or online, your desire to donate is stored in a secure, confidential database. Should your death result in the opportunity for you to be a donor, an official record of your donor designation will be readily available and cannot be overturned by your family. Thus, should you be medically suitable to donate, your wishes will be respected and your family will be relieved of the burden of making a decision on your behalf.

**Can I sign up my children?**

Due to federal privacy laws, the Donate Life Tennessee Registry can't accept registrations for children 12 and under. Until registrants and non-registrants alike are 18 years old, their parents (or legal guardians) will make the final decision about organ and tissue donation.

**I have an advance directive authorizing donation of my organs. Should I also register with the Donate Life Tennessee Registry, or will the advance directive be enough?**

In Tennessee, signing up on the Donate Life Tennessee Registry is the only way to ensure that your wishes to donate are honored. Families don't always have the time to check legal documents before the subject of organ donation comes up. Since the Donate Life Tennessee Registry is consulted in all potential donation cases before approaching the family, we can share proof of registration with family members when donation is discussed with them. Each state has its own laws regarding consent for organ and tissue donation. Some states have registries while others rely on donor cards or advance directives. If consent is not given through any of these means, all states defer to next-of-kin to make the donation decision on behalf of their loved one.

**What if something happens to me while I'm traveling?**

All matters concerning organ and tissue donation are under the jurisdiction of each state's or country's respective laws. While your Donate Life Tennessee registration will not serve as legally binding consent for donation outside Tennessee, it will serve as a clear indication of your wish to donate and will be shared with your family when they are approached by the local organ recovery agency.

**Myths About Donation**

Your decision about organ donation should be based on facts, so it's important to educate yourself about some of the common misconceptions about donation.

**How can I be sure that doctors and nurses will do everything they can to save me if I register to be an organ and tissue donor?**

You will receive the same level of care regardless of whether or not you are an organ and tissue donor. According to federal law, doctors who are treating you in the hospital are not permitted to be involved with transplant programs or patients waiting for an organ transplant.
How can someone be sure that they will be dead when organs and tissues are recovered?

Organ and tissue recovery takes place only after all efforts to save your life have been exhausted and death has been legally declared. The medical team treating you is completely separate from the transplant team.

Do famous or wealthy people get transplants quicker?

A person's wealth and social status are never considered when determining who receives a lifesaving organ transplant. Organ recipients are selected based upon criteria including location, length of time on the waiting list, medical urgency and tissue matching. A national computerized matching system is used to match available organs with potential recipients.

Organ donation is against my religion.

The donation of life is an act of human kindness. If you have questions about the spiritual implications of organ donation, talk to a person of authority within your faith.

If I am a donor, can I still have an open casket viewing at my funeral?

Someone who is an organ and tissue donor can have a traditional funeral service with an open casket viewing. The donation operation does not disfigure the body. Through the entire donation process, the body is treated with care, respect, and dignity and is reconstructed once organs and tissues are removed.

Is the donor's family charged for the donation process? Who pays for funeral arrangements?

All costs related to donation are paid by the organ and tissue recovery organization. The family will receive a hospital bill for any lifesaving efforts that took place for their family member. The family makes the funeral arrangements and is responsible for all costs associated with the funeral. Donation does not interrupt funeral arrangements.

Is there an age limit for donors? With my medical history, can I still donate?

Almost everyone, regardless of age, can donate something to help others. Donors can range in age from newborn to senior citizen. People of all ages and most medical histories can give a precious gift by becoming an organ and tissue donor. Careful tests are done before removing organs to ensure the donor has no infectious diseases that could put the recipient at risk. Complete medical screening and evaluation is done to ensure the organs and tissues are suitable for transplantation.

Can organs be sold? Can someone get paid for donating?

It is against the law to buy or sell human organs and tissues in the U.S. In 1984, Congress passed the National Organ Transplant Act, which outlawed buying and selling human
organs. By federal law, all organs recovered for transplant from deceased donors in this country are monitored and tightly controlled by the United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS) making it illegal to retrieve or transplant human organs outside of the system. The intent of the law is to ensure equal access to donor organs.

**Is donation emotionally painful for donor families?**

Many families say that donation often eases their grief because they know that their personal tragedy gave new life to others. Not knowing how their loved one felt about donation makes discussing it difficult, which is why it is so important to register your decision and talk to your family about donating life.

**If I donate my loved one's organs, will the recipients know who I am?**

The identity of all parties is kept confidential unless both parties agree otherwise. The donor family and transplant recipient may opt to receive information such as age, gender and state of residence of the donor or recipient. Individually, the recipient may be told the circumstances of death, and the donor family may be informed of the transplants that were performed and receive feedback on how the health and lives of the recipients have improved. The donation agency facilitates correspondence and meetings initiated by either the donor family or the recipient, but only if both parties give consent.