

When You Need A Transfusion

If you have never had a transfusion before, it is normal to be a little concerned. Whether the person getting the transfusion is you or a family member, we would like to answer some questions you might have.

Transfusion of blood components may be a recommended and beneficial treatment for many medical conditions. Blood transfusions are common: about 5 million Americans have transfusions every year. It is the most frequently performed medical procedure that people have during hospital stays.

What to expect

When your medical provider decides that you might need a transfusion, two separate blood samples are collected from you to identify your blood type. Each tube will be labeled as belonging to you, and tested to confirm your blood type.

Before starting the transfusion, your caregiver will tell you about any signs or symptoms to watch for during or after your transfusion. They may measure your blood pressure, heart rate, body temperature and breathing. This information is used during the transfusion to assure your safety and comfort. Transfusion usually takes from one to four hours. If you feel any discomfort or unusual symptoms during the transfusion tell your caregiver immediately.

Safe blood supply

The safety of the blood supply is our top priority. We have strict procedures, lab tests and many safeguards in place to make sure that the blood you receive is safe. As a result, the risk of transmitting infectious diseases by blood transfusion is very low. You can be confident about the blood you are receiving:

- All donors are unpaid volunteers – the safest source for donor blood.
- Each donor is carefully screened with a detailed questionnaire and confidential interview. This includes medical history, foreign travel, and social activities. If they have been exposed to known risks, they cannot donate.
- Lab testing is performed by trained staff. All donated blood components are tested for infectious diseases or disorders based on national standards enforced by the FDA (U.S. Food and Drug Administration).

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Adverse effects

With so many safeguards in place, the risk of you having a reaction or adverse event from a transfusion received in the U.S. is very low. Actions by Bloodworks and your medical provider are intended to minimize patient risk, but cannot completely eliminate all medical risks. We want you to understand both the risks and the benefits of transfusion.

With current testing of donor blood, the risk of you getting an infection from a transfusion is extremely low. For HIV, the estimated risk is one occurrence in 2.3 million transfusions. Hepatitis B risk is estimated at one in 1 million transfusions; for Hepatitis C, the risk is one in 1.8 million.

A patient can experience immediate reactions during or within hours of transfusion. Sometimes reactions can be delayed, occurring days or weeks afterward. The most common reactions are usually not serious, and can include hives and itching or fever and chills. Both are readily treatable.

In rare cases more serious reactions can occur, including: shortness of breath, change in blood pressure, bacterial transmission, kidney damage and others. They can also include Transfusion-Related Acute Lung Injury (TRALI) – an immune reaction affecting the lungs. Side effects are usually treatable, but in rare cases can be life-threatening. If you have questions about potential reactions, please share them with your medical provider.

Other risks may arise for patients with specific medical conditions. This includes patients with compromised immune systems, pregnant women, newborns, transplant recipients and others. Iron overload can occur in patients who need multiple transfusions. Your medical provider will discuss any risk factors that may apply to you.

Can I store and receive my own blood?

For some elective surgeries, your medical provider may recommend that you store your own blood in advance – a process called “autologous donation.” While the use of autologous blood reduces the risk of some adverse events, it does not eliminate all risks.

Autologous collection usually occurs about four weeks before a scheduled surgery – since red blood cells can be stored only for 42 days. Collections should begin at least 10 to 14 days prior to your surgery. One unit (pint) is taken at each collection. Your physician will determine how many units are collected and stored. In certain cases, children may make autologous blood donations. Your medical provider can tell you if this procedure is suitable for you and your child.

To arrange for autologous collection, your medical provider will contact Bloodworks to request the procedure for you. A Bloodworks representative will then contact you to schedule the collection. If your medical provider later decides that your stored blood is not needed, it will be discarded – and this happens frequently. Bloodworks charges a fee for collecting, testing and processing your blood, regardless of whether or not it is used. This fee is payable by you as the patient, or may be payable by your insurance provider. You should consult with your insurance carrier in advance to determine if the cost of autologous units is covered.

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Can my family or friends donate for me?

We encourage you to tell your friends and family about the importance of blood donation. We do not collect or hold blood for individual patients, nor will you be given credit for their donation.

About this brochure

The information in this brochure is for educational purposes only – to inform patients who may receive a transfusion. It is not a substitute for the Transfusion Consent Form, and the discussion that your medical provider will have with you. It does not explain the specific medical reasons and risks associated with the transfusion that your own medical provider has prescribed for you.

Want to become a blood donor?

Learn more by visiting our website at www.BloodworksNW.org.
Schedule an appointment online at schedule.bloodworksnw.org or by calling (800) 398-7888.

About Us

Bloodworks Northwest (formerly Puget Sound Blood Center) is an independent, community-based nonprofit organization with a tradition blending volunteerism, medical science and research to improve patient care. A leader in transfusion medicine, Bloodworks serves patients in more than 90 hospitals and clinics across the Northwest. Patients undergoing surgery or receiving trauma care, cancer treatment, organ transplants or therapies for blood disorders or disease all depend on Bloodworks.

If you still have questions, please contact your medical provider
or visit www.BloodworksNW.org.