Organ, Tissue, and Eye Donation

There are more than 117,000 people in the U.S. waiting for a life-saving organ transplant. Thousands are waiting for tissue donations. One person is added to the waiting list every 11 minutes. Sadly, 19 people die each day waiting for an organ\(^1\). There are many more people who need an organ than there are organs available. Studies show that while 90 percent of people support organ and tissue donation, only about half actually donate\(^2\) their organs. People should take time to learn about organ and tissue donation now so that they will be able to make the decision that is right for them.

What is Organ Donation?

“Organs” refer to a person’s heart, lungs, liver, pancreas, small intestine and kidneys. Organs are thought of as “life saving.” Before transplants were done, failure of one of these organs meant death. In the 1950’s and 1960’s, doctors began learning how to transplant organs from one person to another. Today, more than 28,000 organ transplants are performed every year.

Organs are delicate and must have blood and oxygen to work. Because of this, organ donation must occur in the hospital where specially trained doctors and nurses can remove them. A person who donates their organs could save the lives of up to eight people. The person who donates their organs is known as an “organ donor.” The person who receives an organ transplant is known as a “recipient.”

What is Tissue Donation?

This includes skin grafts, heart valves, musculoskeletal tissues (i.e. bone grafts, tendons and ligaments) and cornea transplants. Skin grafts save the lives of severe burn patients and can also be used for breast reconstruction after mastectomy. Heart valves replace damaged valves and treat other heart problems. Bone grafts, tendons and ligaments can repair or replace tissue lost to cancer, trauma, joint disease and arthritis. This may prevent amputation and restore mobility. Cornea transplants provide the gift of sight.

More than one million people receive tissue transplants each year. Surgeons should use a tissue bank that is accredited by the American Association of Tissue Banks (AATB), a professional, non-profit, scientific and educational organization. AATB standards for tissue banking are thought to be the most definitive in the world. UW Organ and Tissue Donation partners with The Blood Center of Wisconsin/Wisconsin Tissue Bank, which is accredited by the AATB.
What is Brain Death?

“Brain death” occurs when someone’s brain stops working. This may be due to an accident, stroke or after being deprived of oxygen. Doctors can tell when someone is brain dead by testing certain reflexes controlled by the brain and by using machines that look at blood flow to the brain. The brain controls our breathing so people who are brain dead are in a hospital on a breathing machine called a ventilator. Because of the ventilator and certain medicines, the person’s body can function even after death. This allows the heart to supply the organs with blood and oxygen until a transplant team can arrive. Once removed, the organs must be transplanted quickly into a recipient. Heart and lung transplants must be done within 6 hours, a liver within 12 hours, a pancreas within 18 hours and a kidney within 24 hours.

Donation after Cardiac Death

Sometimes a patient’s injury is so severe that doctors cannot save their life. The doctors then discuss with the patient’s family whether or not to remove life support. If the family chooses to remove life support, the machines are turned off and the patient is allowed to die peacefully. In certain cases, these patients can be organ and tissue donors. Transplant teams are called and are present when the life support is turned off. After the patient’s heart stops beating and the doctor declares death, the transplant teams can remove the organs and tissues.

Myths

Many people do not know what organ and tissue donation is. They may have heard rumors about it that are wrong. We should all learn the facts about organ and tissue donation so one can make an informed decision. There are four main myths:

**Myth 1:** Organ donation involves cutting up the body. You can’t have an open casket funeral.

Organs are removed in an operating room by specially trained surgeons. A single incision is made that is covered by clothing. Tissue can be removed from areas that can be covered by clothing. It is done under sterile conditions in surgery by skilled medical professionals. Tissue donation is often done within 12-24 hours after death. In most cases, funerals are arranged the same whether the person was a donor or not.

**Myth 2:** It costs the donor’s family money to donate organs and tissues.

The donor’s family does not pay for any of the costs of donating an organ or tissue. The organ and tissue transplant team pays all of the costs. The family must pay for the costs of caring for the patient before they died and for the funeral after death. These are the same costs whether the patient donates or not.
Myth 3: Donation will delay funeral plans.

Organ and tissue donation will not delay funeral plans. Transplant teams work closely with funeral homes to make sure that any necessary arrangements are taken care of.

Myth 4: If doctors know I’m an organ or tissue donor, they won’t work as hard to save my life.

Organ and tissue donation is never considered until after a person has died or after all efforts to save that person’s life have failed. The doctors and nurses who care for the person in the hospital are not the same ones who remove the organs or tissues.

Who Can Be a Donor?

All people should think about being an organ or tissue donor. You shouldn’t assume you can’t donate because of your current health. Science and medicine change on a daily basis. Things we can’t do today, we may be able to do tomorrow. Because of this, there are no age limits or diseases that strictly rule out organ and tissue donation. At the time of a person’s death, the doctors and nurses will work together to see if a person can be an organ and tissue donor.

How Do I Become an Organ Donor?

In Wisconsin, as in most states, people who wish to legally authorize organ and tissue donation should register as an organ donor. In Wisconsin, people can register online at YesIWillWisconsin.com, (all states: DonateLifeAmerica.com), or at the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). You should also consider adding this information to a Living Will or Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care, and tell your family that you are a registered organ and tissue donor. If you are not a registered organ and tissue donor, your next of kin will be asked to make this decision for you at the time of your death. It is very helpful if they know what their loved one’s decision is. Tell them what you want, and take the time to find out their donor status as well.

Order of Next-Of-Kin

- Health care agent of power of attorney
- Spouse
- Adult Child
- Parent
- Adult Sibling
- Adult Grandchild
- Grandparent
- Adult who showed special care or concern for the patient
- Legal Guardian
- Coroner or Medical Examiner
Who Do I Call if I Want to Learn More?

Staff at the University of Wisconsin Organ and Tissue Donation Services (UW OTD) can answer your questions and provide more information. You can contact the UW OTD from 8-4:30 pm Monday through Friday at (608) 265-0356. For further details, go to www.uwotd.org

References