

Frequently Asked Questions

1. How can I register my intentions to be an organ and tissue donor?

There are two steps to indicating your wishes to be an organ and tissue donor:

Talk to your loved ones about your decision so they can understand, support and respect your wishes in the future. It is important they know about your intentions, as they will be asked to give final consent to your organ/tissue donation in the event of your death.

Register as an organ and tissue donor with OHIP. You can register your intentions through OHIP's donor registry. Information is held in a central information bank and coded into health cards. OHIP Organ and Tissue Donation Forms can be obtained by visiting your local OHIP office or by downloading from the TGLN website (www.giftoflife.on.ca).

2. How can I find out more information about organ and tissue donation?

You can receive more information by contacting Trillium Gift of Life Network (TGLN) at 1-800-263-2833 or by visiting TGLN website (www.giftoflife.on.ca)

3. Why should I donate my organs and tissue?

Your decision to donate could save a life. There is a chronic shortage of organs and tissue in Ontario and the need for organs and tissue continues to outweigh their availability. Almost 1,700 Ontarians are waiting for an organ transplant and many others are waiting for a tissue transplant. One person dies every three days waiting for a life-saving organ transplant in Ontario.

4. What organs and tissue can be donated?

Organs and tissue that can be donated include the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, pancreas, small bowel, corneas, heart valves, bone and skin.

5. Do transplants really work?

Transplants not only save lives; they also recapture productive lives. Outcomes continue to improve each year, so more and more transplant patients are living enhanced, productive lives.

6. Can anyone donate?

Everyone is a potential organ and tissue donor. Age is less important than the health of the organs and tissue. The oldest Canadian organ donor to date was over 90 years of age while the oldest tissue donor was 102. Ultimately, the ability to become an organ

and tissue donor depends on several factors, including the health of the organs and tissue at the time of death.

It is important to keep in mind that the vast majority of organ donors have suffered brain death, or “neurological death.” However, brain death only occurs in approximately 1.5 – 2% of all in-hospital deaths. With approximately 30,000 in-hospital deaths in Ontario each year, this equals a potential donor pool of about 450 – 600 individuals per year.

Subtract from that the number of people who are deemed medically unsuitable. Subtract from this number the number of families who decline to consent to donation, and we have an even smaller number of potential donors. Given how rare it is to be considered an organ donor, it is extremely important that people talk with their families about their desire to be an organ donor.

7. If I have cancer or another serious illness, can I still be an organ and tissue donor?

Even an individual with a serious illness can sometimes be an organ or tissue donor. For example, in the case of cancer, it would depend on the type of cancer and how long ago the person was treated. If you have a concern, talk it over with your doctor. Ultimately, the ability to become an organ and tissue donor depends on several factors, including the health of the organs and tissue at the time of death.

8. Is donation confidential?

Yes. No one will know about your “gift of life” unless your family tells them.

9. What if donation conflicts with my religious beliefs?

Most major religions support organ and tissue donation as an honoured and compassionate expression of generosity and love. If your religion restricts the use of a body after death, consult your faith leader. Restrictions may not apply if the donation could save another’s life.

10. If I have indicated my decision for organ donation, will everything be done to save my life?

The first and foremost concern for health-care professionals caring for critically ill patients is to do everything possible to save lives. The possibility of donation is considered only when all life-saving efforts have failed and brain death is declared.

11. When does organ and tissue donation become an option?

- Living organ donation may be an option for a healthy adult who has a family member or close friend in need of a kidney or liver transplant. With living donation, a kidney or portion of the liver is removed from the donor and transplanted into the patient in need of a new organ. On a few occasions, living donors have also donated part of their lung or small bowel.

- Deceased organ donation can take place when someone has been declared brain dead and a doctor has determined the organs can be used for transplant. This type of donation is referred to as donation after brain death.
- Another option is donation after cardiac death (DCD). DCD offers families the option to donate when brain death criteria have not been met, and the decision to withdraw life-sustaining treatment has been made. DCD patients have no hope of recovering, and they will die within minutes or hours after being disconnected from life support. Once their heart stops beating, they are taken to the operating room for organ donation.
- Tissue donation can take place in most cases when someone has died, as long as the tissue is determined suitable for transplant by a doctor. With tissue donation, there is no need for blood flow to be maintained by artificial ventilation after death.

12. What if I change my mind?

If you change your mind let your family know of your decision. If you registered with OHIP, contact them about your change of decision.

13. What is "whole body donation"?

If you cannot or do not wish to donate organs, you may want to support teaching and research activities at a medical school by considering whole body donation, an important gift to the training of professionals in health-related disciplines. For more information about whole body donation, please call the anatomy school of your choice or the Office of the Chief Coroner at 1-877-991-9959.

14. Can I donate my organs and tissue, and then give my body to medical science?

If you give your body to medical science, your organs and tissue will not be available for transplantation. Similarly, if you donate organs or tissue, you cannot donate your body to science.

15. Does organ and tissue donation affect funeral services? Can I have an open casket?

Recovery of donated organs and tissue is carried out with surgical skill, respect, and dignity, and does not change the appearance of the body. It does not interfere with funeral practices and no one will know about your gift of life unless your family tells them.

16. What happens after the organs and tissue are removed?

The body is released to the family or funeral home. Every effort is made to schedule the recovery of organs and tissue in a timely fashion. There may be a 24-36 hour delay due to the required surgery.

17. Does the donor's family have to pay for the cost of organ donation?

No. The donor's family neither pays for nor receives payment for organ and tissue donation. All costs related to donation are paid for by the organ procurement program or transplant centre. Only the funeral expenses remain the responsibility of the donor's family.

18. Can I choose which organs and tissue I want to donate?

You may indicate your decision to donate all organs and tissue or only specified organs and tissue.

19. Can I designate the recipient of my organs or tissue?

Donated organs and tissue are given to individual recipients based on need, blood type, genetic match and other criteria. "Directed donation," as it is known, is not practised in Canada. Only through living donation can the recipient be designated. Living donation may be an option for kidney, liver or lung transplants. If you are interested in being considered as a living donor, discuss this with your doctor.

20. Who will receive my organs and tissue? Will they stay in Ontario or Canada?

The hospital will contact Trillium Gift of Life Network (TGLN), which keeps a list of everyone in Ontario who is waiting for an organ transplant. TGLN will match the tissue and blood type of the donor to an individual(s) on the waiting list. If a match is found, the individual(s) who for medical reasons most needs a transplant will receive the donated organs. If the medical urgency is the same, the individual on the waiting list the longest will receive the organ. If there is no suitable match, a cross-reference is made across Canada and possibly in the United States if need be.

21. I already signed a donor card/or registered in another Canadian province. Do I have to register again in Ontario?

Organ and tissue donation is a provincial program, so you should register again when you move. But the most important thing to do is talk to your family and loved ones about your wishes so that they can understand and respect them in the future.

22. Can my family override my wishes and if so, why?

When you sign a donor card, you give doctors permission to recover your organs and tissue upon death. This does not mean that the doctors must recover your organs. Out of respect for the wishes of grieving families, hospital staff will talk with the next of kin about their feelings regarding donation and what their loved one would have wanted. That is why it is important that you talk with your family and loved ones about your wishes and your decision to give the gift of life.

For more information contact:

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