

Organ donation

The Australian Organ Donor Register is a way for people to formally register their wish to donate their organs after they die. Organ transplants give many people a second chance at life. Donated tissues help people with a variety of major illnesses. You should discuss organ and tissue donation with your family so that they will know if you wish to donate organs and tissues after you die.

Who benefits from organ and tissue donation?

Transplanted organs and body tissue help to save and improve lives. Those on waiting lists may need:

- Lungs, heart, liver, pancreas or kidneys
- Corneal grafts to restore failing eyesight
- Skin to treat serious burns
- Bone, when bone grafting is necessary
- Heart valves for use in heart surgery.

At any time thousands of Australians require organ and tissue transplants, with several hundred at risk of dying if they are unable to receive a transplant.

What organs and tissues can I donate?

A number of your organs and body tissues can be donated. Organs include:

- Kidneys and liver
- Heart and lungs
- Pancreas.

Body tissues include:

- Heart valves
- Bone and skin
- Corneas from your eyes.

When can organs and tissues be used?

Organs can only be used in special circumstances. People who donate organs have been declared 'brain dead' in hospital. Usually, they have been on a ventilator in intensive care.

Will I really be dead?

You must be declared dead before your organs and body tissues can be used. There are two definitions of death in Australia:

- **Irreversible brain death** - the brain stops forever. A number of tests are used to determine whether you are in a coma (you are unconscious, but the brain may heal) or if your brain has irreversibly stopped working. Two senior doctors not involved in transplantation will carry out these tests.
- **Irreversible cardiac death** - the heart stops forever and blood stops circulating through your body.

What happens after I die?

- Removal of organs and body tissues is no different to any other operation. Remember:
- You will feel no discomfort
- Your body will not be disfigured
- The operations are performed by highly skilled, senior surgeons

Can my organs be used if I've been sick?

Your doctor can advise you whether a chronic condition or prolonged medication may cause your organs to be unsuitable for transplantation to another person. The criteria to determine suitability for organ donation change regularly. It is preferable to indicate your willingness to become a donor regardless of current or past health issues.

Discuss organ donation with your family

Many opportunities for organ donation are missed because the person who died had not told their family they wished to be an organ and tissue donor. You should:

- Think about your attitudes to organ and tissue donation well before any crisis or tragedy
- Talk about the issues with your family
- Tell your family of your decision.

If you are not on the register, organ donation may still be discussed with your family after you die. But it will be hard for them to make a decision if they don't know your wishes.

How the register works

Contact the Australian Organ Donor Register for a registration form. If you die in hospital, authorised staff are then able to:

- Check the Australian Organ Donor Register to see if you have registered your wishes
- Discuss your wishes with your family
- Seek consent from your family to proceed with organ and tissue donation.

Death at home or away from a hospital rules out organ donation (as oxygen has been lost for the vital organs) but retrieval of tissue material is still possible for several hours after death away from a hospital.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- The Australian Organ Donor Register Tel. 1800 777 203
- The Victorian Organ Donation Service (LIFEGift) Tel: (03) 9349 4762

Things to remember

- Discuss organ donation with your family.
- Join the Australian Organ Donor Register to ensure your wish to donate is known, recorded and able to be noted by authorised medical personnel.
- You are declared brain or heart dead before your organs or tissues are retrieved.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Red Cross Blood Service

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