Donor FAQs

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Why should I donate blood?

The need for blood affects us all. Eight out of ten people need blood or blood products at some time in our lives. One out of every ten patients in hospital requires blood transfusion. The number of blood donations that patients receive depends on their medical condition. Although an average of three donations is transfused to a patient, some patients require many more.

Blood is in constant demand for the treatment of patients involved in accidents, patients with cancer, leukemia or with a bleeding disorder such as haemophilia among others. Many surgical operations would not be possible without the availability of blood. Blood may be needed during or following childbirth or for an exchange transfusion in newborn babies.

The need for blood never stops. Blood donors save lives. Every blood donation gives the person who receives it a new chance at life.

Who may donate blood?

Donors must be between the ages of 16 and 65, weigh at least 50kg, not have donated blood within the previous 56 days. The criteria, which are applied before a person can be accepted as a blood donor, are very strict. Not everyone can be a blood donor. The strict criteria applied to the selection of blood donors are designed to protect the health of the donor as well as the health of the patient who receives the blood.

For example, people who have certain medical conditions or who are taking certain types of medication are not permitted to donate. People whose social behaviour places them at increased risk of transmitting infections through transfusion are also not permitted to donate blood, and must please not do so.

SANBS' mission is to provide all patients with sufficient, safe, quality blood. If you are in any doubt about whether you should donate blood, please discuss it with an SANBS staff member.

Do I need my parents' permission to give blood?

You may decide for yourself whether you want to become a blood donor from the age of 16. If you are a scholar, it is usually a good idea to discuss blood donation with your parents doing so.

What do I get in return for my blood donation?

Blood is donated voluntarily, freely and without payment or reward of any kind. Blood must only be donated in the spirit of altruism for patients who need blood or blood products as part of their medical treatment. Blood is donated as an act of goodwill towards a fellow human being, and nothing should be expected in return for giving this gift of life.

What you do get in return is a physical and emotional sense of well-being and the knowledge that you saved someone's life. We all hope that someone will do the same for us when we need a blood transfusion.

If any of the exclusion criteria apply to you, or if for any reason you think that your blood may be unsafe to transfuse to a patient you're advised not to donate.

Is there a substitute for blood?

Blood is made up of different components and each component has its own important function. The main function of red blood cells is to carry oxygen to the tissues and remove carbon dioxide.

The main function of platelets and the coagulation factors is to prevent and stop bleeding. Each one of these blood components has an

important role, and any one of these components may be used in the treatment of patients with certain medical conditions.

Substances designed to carry oxygen such as a haemoglobin solution prepared from cattle's blood are currently being evaluated. This is available in very limited quantities internationally. These oxygen carriers circulate in the blood stream for a short period and are usually only used as an interim measure.

In cases of trauma or during surgical operations, blood volume which is lost by the patient may initially be replaced with synthetic solutions (crystalloid or colloid solutions) such as normal saline. These solutions are not recognized as "blood substitutes" but are blood volume expanders. They do not carry oxygen.

They are frequently used in the initial treatment of patients, for example in the ambulance or in the operating theatre, while blood is being obtained from the blood bank.

There is no substitute for blood. When the patient's haemoglobin level, platelet level, or coagulation factor level falls below a critical point, blood transfusion is the only option.

Patients rely on voluntary blood donors to provide red blood cells, platelets and clotting factors, to meet their medical needs.

What does it mean to have a rare blood type?

Every person belongs to one of the four ABO blood group types, i.e. A, B, AB, or O. In addition to these ABO blood groups, people's red blood cells consist of many other antigens as part of their red cell structure.

Occasionally, people have an unusual, specific red cell antigen. Alternatively, some individual's red cells lack an antigen which is common to most people. This would be recognised as a "rare" blood type. Some patients have antibodies against a specific blood type and in these circumstances it may be difficult to find blood from a regular blood donor, which is compatible with that of the rare type of the patient.

Before every blood transfusion, compatibility tests are performed on the blood of the patient and on the blood of the donor, to ensure that the transfused blood won't cause any untoward reaction in the recipient.

First time blood donors are notified by mail of their ABO blood

group and Rhesus (Rh) blood type, after the blood has been tested in the central laboratory.

How does SANBS meet the need for rare blood types?

If a patient who needs a blood transfusion is identified by the blood bank as having an unusual blood type, blood that is compatible with that of the patient will be identified from the panel of regular blood donors.

South Africa has compiled a panel of blood donors who have rare blood types. This is the so-called “rare donor file”. Blood from donors on this panel can be obtained whenever needed.

In exceptional cases, where compatible blood cannot be obtained in this country, blood is obtained from another countries through the international rare donor file. Similarly, on rare occasions, blood from a South African donor will be sent to an overseas country to be transfused to a specific patient with a rare blood group antibody.

Is there anything special I need to do before donating?

Eat at your regular mealtimes and drink plenty of fluid before you donate blood. Have a snack at least four hours before you donate, but do not eat too much right before the donation.

Before you leave the blood donor clinic after your blood donation, have some tea, coffee or a soft drink to help replace the blood volume (approximately 480 ml) which has been reduced as a result of your donation.

Avoid taking aspirin or aspirin-like anti-inflammatory medication in the 72 hours prior to your donation, because aspirin inhibits the function of blood platelets. If you have taken aspirin within this period, your blood platelet component cannot be transfused to a patient.

What is the procedure when I donate blood?

Firstly, you will be asked to provide personal details such as your name, address, age, weight, ID number and / or date of birth. A medical history is taken by means of a written questionnaire.

These questions are designed to ascertain that it is medically safe for you to donate blood and that the recipient of your blood will not be harmed in any way. In addition, very personal questions relating to your social behaviour are asked to ascertain that you are not an individual at increased risk of potentially transmitting infection through transfusion. People are asked to exclude themselves from

blood donation if any of the exclusion criteria apply to them.

A finger prick test is performed in order to ascertain if your haemoglobin level is within a safe range for donation purposes. In addition, your pulse rate and blood pressure will also be checked. Potential donors will be permitted to donate only if these measurements are within the defined, acceptable range. If everything is in order you will proceed to donate your blood.

How long does the donation take?

The procedure, which is performed by a trained, skilled nurse, takes approximately 30 minutes. You will give about 480ml of blood, after which you will be advised to remain on the donor bed for a few minutes longer while having some refreshments. Plan to spend about half an hour to an hour at the blood clinic for the entire process, depending on the size of the clinic and the number of donors.

Does the needle hurt the entire time?

No. There may be a little sting when the needle is inserted, but there should be no pain whatsoever during the rest of the donation.

How long will it take my body to replenish the donated blood?

Your body replaces the blood volume (plasma) within 24 hours. Red blood cells are replaced by the bone marrow into the circulatory system within about three to four weeks, while the lost iron is replaced over approximately six to eight weeks.

How will I feel after the donation?

Most people feel great! Donors who know what to expect and have eaten regular meals, or have had a snack and fluids before donating, are usually fine. Most people who donate blood have no after-effect. Drink extra fluids four hours following your donation. A small number of people feel light-headed and others occasionally faint after donating.

In the unlikely event that you feel faint, be sure to quickly lie completely flat. Lying flat, even if on the floor, with your legs elevated, will usually resolve any feelings of dizziness or light-headedness quite quickly and may prevent fainting.

In the event that you do not feel well after a blood donation, please contact the staff at your nearest blood donor centre.

Can I donate during my menstrual period?

Yes, if you are feeling well.

How soon after donating can I participate in sport?

After donation, it's best to have a snack and drink plenty of fluids over the next four hours. You can then resume routine sporting or training activity. It is advisable not to donate blood three to four weeks before participating in a major sporting event such as the Comrades Marathon, or a competitive rugby or soccer match, where you intend to push yourself to the limit of your ability.

In the unlikely event that you do feel faint, light-headed or unwell during any sporting activities, the standard good advice is to immediately stop the activity and rest. Many active sports people are active blood donors.

Sportsmen who frequently push themselves to their limit during their sporting activities should consider donating only platelets. In this situation the red blood cells are returned to the donor after the donation and the individual's oxygen-carrying capacity and performance aren't compromised. Facilities for donating platelets are available in Pretoria, Johannesburg, Durban, Bloemfontein and Cape Town.

How often can I donate blood?

You may donate either whole blood or a specific blood component such as blood platelets. Each type of donation requires a certain waiting period before you can give again. After a whole blood donation, a person must wait at least 56 days before donating again.

This makes six donations a year quite possible. Most people can comfortably give four donations per year. Women of childbearing age are advised to give no more than four donations per year. Platelet donors are able to donate as often as once a month (12 times per year), while dedicated whole blood donors can even fit in seven donations every second year.

Is it possible to get AIDS from donating blood?

No, certainly not! You cannot get Aids or any other infectious disease by giving blood. This is a commonly asked question, especially among young people, who have heard of the link between HIV and blood. The materials used for your blood donation, including the needle, bag, tubes and finger prick needle are new, sterile and disposable. These are used only once for your blood donation and then destroyed after use

What is a "unit" of blood?

A unit is about 480ml of donated blood. The average adult has between four and five litres of blood in his or her body, and can

easily spare one unit.

What tests are performed on my blood after donation?

Specimen of your blood will be tested to determine your ABO blood group and Rhesus (Rh) type. Other tests will be performed to detect certain transfusion-transmitted infections such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C, Syphilis and HIV/AIDS. Not every infection in a person's blood can be detected by these blood tests. It is therefore vitally important that people who may have been infected with a transfusion transmissible disease must not, under any circumstances donate blood.

After the tests have been performed, your blood will be used either as whole blood (transfused to one patient) or, after separation into its various components such as the red blood cells, platelets and plasma component to help several patients