

Living Donor Information



Walter Reed
National Military
Medical Center

This document is intended to guide you through the questions and concerns that typically come up when considering the role of a living donor.

To begin, let's start at the basics.

BASICS

What is a living donor?

Living donors are people who choose to have one of their two functional kidneys transplanted into another person whose kidneys are no longer functioning.

Who can be a living donor?

There are three important requirements to become a living donor:

- You must be at least 18 years old and younger than 65.
- You must be in good health with no signs of kidney disease.
- You must have a blood type that is compatible with the patient receiving the kidney.

Beyond these three requirements, there are no other specifications for living donors. This means that a living donor could be a member of the recipient's family, a close friend, or a complete stranger. Living donors do not have any limitations based on race or gender.

Now, let's examine the different phases of the organ donation process and the questions often associated with each phase.

PRE-OPERATION

What tests are needed to find out if I can be a donor?

The Transplant Team at Walter Reed Bethesda will assist you through the process of testing to determine if you are a match. These tests include:

- Blood pressure test
- Heart rate and lung function tests
- Blood and urine tests
- Blood vessels (of the kidney) test
- Pap smear and breast exam (if female)
- Colonoscopy (if over 50)
- Behavioral health exam

None of these tests require an overnight stay, and will be scheduled at your convenience.

How long does it take before I know if I am a match?

The process of evaluating a potential donor can last several months.

What financial concerns accompany being a living donor?

Medicare or the recipient's private insurance will cover the donor's medical costs. However, there are other financial considerations that are not covered:

- Time off from work
- Hotel costs
- Childcare
- Meals
- Gas
- Parking

Important note: donation of a kidney may impact a donor's ability to receive or afford health, disability, or life insurance. Additionally, donors will have difficulty getting jobs in military service, law enforcement, aviation and firefighting.

Is there anything else I should be aware of before donating?

You should never feel pressured to donate. All donors have the right to halt the transplant process at any point—even the day of the procedure. Donation is never guaranteed to succeed. On average, a donated kidney will last roughly 15 years, but it is not a certainty.

OPERATION

What is involved in the procedure of donor surgery? What are the different types of donor surgery?

The donor and the recipient undergo surgery at the same time. The process usually takes between two and four hours. Both patients receive general anesthesia and therefore will not be awake nor feel any pain during the procedure.

There are two methods of surgery available for the surgeon to perform:

- **Open surgery**

In an open surgery, the surgeon makes an incision on the donor's abdominal region to access and remove the kidney. The cut is then stitched closed at the end of surgery.

- **Laparoscopy**

Laparoscopy involves the surgeon making a much smaller incision (two to four inches in length) in the donor's abdominal region. Then, using a camera-guided tool, the surgeon removes the kidney through the small incision.

Laparoscopy is the more commonly used method because of its benefits: shorter hospital stay, smaller incision, shorter recovery, and fewer complications after surgery.

POST-OPERATION

What should I expect when I wake up following surgery?

At the end of surgery, the physicians will place a tube in one of the donor's blood vessels to administer fluids as well as a tube in the donor's bladder to measure urine output. Keeping an eye on urine output is important, as it is an indicator of how the remaining kidney is functioning and adjusting.

What are the medical risks associated with organ donation?

Donors may experience side effects from the procedure. The majority of donors experience the most pain during the first week after surgery. The following issues are typically short-term or resolved over time:

- Bloating
- Pain
- Scars
- Nausea or feeling ill
- Fatigue

Serious side effects associated with organ donation are less common—occurring in roughly five percent of patients. These side effects include:

- Infection
- Fever
- Bleeding/blood clots
- Complications from anesthesia (confusion, pneumonia, possible stroke or heart attack)

The risk of death from donor surgery is less than 3 in 10,000, which is considerably less than one percent.

What should I expect for my recovery following surgery?

Donors typically stay at the hospital for two to four days following their procedure. After they are discharged from the hospital, they are expected to spend the following week resting and recovering at home. The majority of donors are able to drive and return to their normal lives after four to six weeks.

Are there any long-term risks associated with donor surgery?

Studies on the long-term effects of donor surgery have been underway mostly in the past 20 years. Therefore, information on the effects of donor surgery after 40-50 years is limited. Over time (following the donation), the remaining kidney will grow in size to accommodate the increased work load. For most donors, the remaining kidney functions well for the rest of their life.

Donors receive an extensive two-year follow-up care program at Walter Reed Bethesda. After two years, donors are encouraged to continue checkups with their primary care manager or medical home team.



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