

Living Organ Donation



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Becoming a living kidney donor is a very personal decision. It's important that you make the choice that's right for you.

There are two types of organ donation. Living donation happens when someone voluntarily donates an organ or part of an organ to a person in need. Deceased donation takes place when organs become available for transplantation after someone has died.

Why Organ Donation Is So Important

Organ donation saves lives and restores health. A kidney transplant is not a cure, but it offers the best possible improvement to health and quality of life for many people living with kidney failure. The only other life-sustaining treatment available is dialysis, which artificially cleans the blood.

The need for organs for transplantation is much greater than the available supply. Both kinds of organ donation combined still don't meet the need for kidneys for transplantation. Wait time can vary from a few months to several years.

Kidney Transplants Are Highly Successful

Kidney transplantation is a very successful and acceptable treatment. The success rate for a transplant from a living donor is high: 90–95% of these kidneys are working well

Model(s) are a depiction of people with kidney disease.

after one year and they last on average 15 to 20 years. Success rates are improving every year with advances in medical research.

What Exactly Is Living Kidney Donation?

Normally everyone has two kidneys, although you can live a healthy life with just one. Living donation takes place when a person freely decides to donate a kidney to someone who needs a transplant. This offers the person waiting for a transplant an alternative to dialysis or a deceased donor transplant.

Donating a kidney is the most common type of living organ donation. A living kidney transplant is the most successful of all transplant procedures.

Who Can Donate a Kidney?

A living kidney donation usually comes from a family member such as a parent, child, brother, or sister. A donor can also be a spouse, friend, or co-worker. It can even be a stranger. A genetic link between donor and recipient, although helpful, is not always necessary. This is mainly due to improved anti-rejection medications.

Anyone who is healthy can donate a kidney. The age of consent to be a living donor varies from 16 to 19 depending on your province, and living donors are usually under 70 years of age. You must be in good general health with no evidence of significant high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, kidney disease, heart disease, or hepatitis.

Advantages of Living Kidney Donation

Time to Plan

The surgeries can be scheduled when both the donor and recipient are in the best possible health. This will help to ensure that the quality of the donated kidney is at its highest.

Less Waiting

The length of time a recipient waits for a kidney is shorter when the organ comes from a living donor. Also, other recipients on the transplant waiting list will move up the list when the recipient's name is removed.

Avoidance of Dialysis

With a living donor kidney, the transplant surgery can sometimes take place even before the recipient begins dialysis treatments.

Better Donor Organ Survival Rates

The transplanted kidney of a living donor often lasts longer than a kidney from a deceased donor. It tends to be healthier, and often works right away.

Feeling of Satisfaction

For the donor, knowing that you've helped someone in need is a very positive psychological experience.

How to Become a Living Donor

First, learn all you can about living donation and find out your blood type. Then, contact the transplant centre that is taking care of the potential recipient. You'll need to arrange testing to confirm whether your blood type is compatible. From there, the transplant centre staff will lead you through the evaluation process.

If you're considering donating to someone you know, ask them if they're willing to consider you as a donor. Some people living with kidney failure decide not to have a transplant. Or they may decide against a living donor. Whatever the reason, their decision should always be respected. It's their right not to have a transplant or to decline a living donor organ. If the person turns down your offer, it takes nothing away from your generosity. The decisions, rights, and feelings of both parties should be respected.

The Evaluation Process

The evaluation process can take as long as six months. Tests will be done to determine whether you're healthy enough to donate a kidney, and whether you're a good match for the potential recipient. A psychosocial assessment will be scheduled so that you can discuss your feelings or concerns. The health care team will see to it that you receive emotional support throughout the process.

The various tests and appointments may require travel and time off work as you meet with members of the healthcare team. You'll

be working with nephrologists, transplant surgeons, transplant coordinators, and social workers, among others.

Risks

Living kidney donation doesn't change your overall life expectancy, nor does it affect your ability to have children. As with any major surgery, there is a risk of complications, but these can usually be effectively managed.

Short-term risks include pneumonia, infection, pain and discomfort, allergic reaction to anesthesia, collapsed lung, or blood clots. Rarely, death occurs.

In the longer term, potential risks include:

- Slight increased risk of high blood pressure
- Slight increased incidence of kidney failure
- Possibility of injury to the remaining kidney
- Slight risk of developing a disease of the remaining kidney

Some people also experience psychological difficulties, although most donors are satisfied with their decision to donate a kidney.

Costs & Other Practical Matters

Provincial health plans cover the *medical* costs of living donation. In most cases, you will have to pay *non-medical* costs, including travel expenses, out-of-pocket costs, and child-care costs. There could also be a loss of salary for time off work while you recover from the surgery. You may want to check your employer health plan to see whether you have access to sick leave coverage.

There are a few provinces that reimburse some non-medical expenses. Speak to your social worker or living donor coordinator to find out more.

As a potential living donor, you should also speak with your insurance provider about life insurance, private health insurance, and travel insurance policies.

Making the Decision

Deciding to become a living kidney donor is probably one of the biggest decisions you can make during your lifetime. The decision to donate one of your kidneys has to be well-informed and right for you.

Whether you're asked to donate or you come forward on your own, it's natural to have some concerns. There are a lot of factors to consider. It's important to understand the risks and benefits of donation. You'll also want to think about the emotional and practical impact the donation will have on you, your family, your work, and your social life.

Multiple Potential Donors

If there is more than one suitable and willing donor for a specific recipient, the healthcare team will consider all aspects of living donation for each person: physical, emotional, financial, and practical.

People To Talk To

The final decision is yours alone, but talking with knowledgeable people can help you

decide whether you're ready to donate a kidney. People to talk to may include:

- Family members and close friends
- Religious or spiritual advisor
- Financial advisor
- Someone who has donated a kidney
- The Kidney Foundation has peer support programs which match potential living donors with someone who has donated a kidney
- Someone who has received a living kidney donation or who is a member of a living donor support group
- Social worker, counsellor or any member of the healthcare team

Choosing to Donate

Once you've made your decision, the surgery will be scheduled and both you and the recipient will be admitted to the hospital. There will be some final testing before the surgery. If, at that time, there are concerns about the health of either one of you, the surgery may be postponed or cancelled.

Choosing Not to Donate

If you choose not to donate, the healthcare team will support and respect your decision. They will also help you communicate your decision in a way that preserves harmony.

Changing Your Mind

You can change your mind at any time during the evaluation process and the healthcare team will support your decision.

The Surgery & Follow-up

Living kidney donation can be done via traditional open surgery or laparoscopic surgery. The healthcare team will discuss the benefits and risks of each with you, as well as follow-up care. Surgery to remove a kidney is called a *nephrectomy*.

Traditional Open Nephrectomy

This operation takes about two to three hours to complete. You'll remain in hospital for four to six days afterward. Full recovery normally takes six to twelve weeks. You may be able to return to work after four to six weeks if your job is fairly sedentary and doesn't require heavy lifting or physical activity.

Laparoscopic Nephrectomy

This is sometimes also called "keyhole surgery". The operation takes three to four hours, followed by a hospital stay of three to four days. You can usually return to your normal routine in three to four weeks, but if your work involves heavy lifting, the recovery time may be extended. The advantages of the laparoscopic procedure are a smaller incision, less pain and scarring, a shorter hospital stay, and a quicker recovery.

Follow-up Care

You'll see the surgeon again about two weeks after your surgery, and the other members of the healthcare team (nephrologists, nurses, social worker, etc.) six to nine weeks after your surgery. Blood and urine tests will be done to make sure your remaining kidney is working well.

All donors should be followed on a yearly basis for blood pressure, urine, and blood tests. These annual checkups can be arranged through your family doctor or the transplant centre. Donors should also adopt a healthy lifestyle and maintain an appropriate weight to promote long-term health.

A Few Precautions

Following your surgery, you should avoid rough contact sports, such as football and hockey, that could damage your remaining kidney. Pregnancy should be postponed for at least six months after the surgery.

Religious Perspectives on Donation

Many religious groups endorse organ donation and/or respect a person's right to make their own decision. If you have questions about your own religious or spiritual practice, speak with your religious or spiritual leader.

Some Questions for a Potential Donor to Consider:

- How much do I know about living kidney donation?
- What are the benefits and risks to me personally?
- How would the donation affect my family and me financially?
- Will I still be able to get health insurance and life insurance? What about disability and travel insurance?



- What are the implications of losing salary or wages for time off work? Will my employer provide sick leave?
- Is my job physically demanding? How much time after surgery before I can go back to work?
- What is my relationship with the recipient? Will it be different afterward?
- Who will take care of my regular household responsibilities during the evaluation, surgery, and recovery? What about child care and pet care responsibilities? Household chores? Cooking and cleaning? Transportation?

Our Commitment

The Kidney Foundation is working with representatives from healthcare, industry, and government to increase organ donation rates. We encourage Canadians to make a positive decision regarding organ donation and to discuss their wishes with their family.

Where to Go for More Information

Contact your local Kidney Foundation office or organ donation agency, or speak to your family doctor.

OUR VISION

The Kidney Foundation of Canada is committed to achieving excellent kidney health, optimal quality of life, and a cure for kidney disease.

OUR MISSION

The Kidney Foundation of Canada is the national volunteer organization committed to eliminating the burden of kidney disease through:

- Funding and stimulating innovative research for better treatments and a cure;
- Providing education and support to prevent kidney disease in those at risk and empower those with kidney disease to optimize their health status;
- Advocating for improved access to high quality healthcare;
- Increasing public awareness and commitment to advancing kidney health and organ donation.

For further information, or to help us in our efforts, please contact The Kidney Foundation office in your area. You can also visit our website at kidney.ca.

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This material is available in accessible formats upon request by contacting info@kidney.ca or calling 1-800-361-7494.