



**Australians
Donate**

Organ and Tissue Donation Fact Sheet

Background

Australians Donate the peak national body for organ and tissue donation aims to raise awareness of the need for organ and tissue donation in Australia and to increase the number of registrations on the Australian Organ Donor Register (AODR).

Organs that can be donated are the heart, liver, lungs, kidneys and pancreas.

Tissues that can be donated are the corneas, skin, bone, pancreas islets and heart valves.

Statistics

At 2 March 2007, **1 784 people** were waiting for organ transplants: Kidney 1415, Heart 75, Liver 137, Lung 112, Pancreas 45.

By the end of August 2007, **131 people** have donated organs this year.

In 2006 there were 202 organ donors from whom 739 transplants were performed.

In 2005 there were 204 organ donors from whom 729 transplants were performed.

In 2004 there were 218 organ donors from whom 783 transplants were performed.

In 2003 there were 179 organ donors, from whom 619 transplants were performed.

218 organ donors in 2004 represented a 21 per cent increase on 179 organ donors in 2003.

202 donors in 2006 is equivalent to 9.8 donors per million population (dpmp), which is still one of the lowest in the developed world. As a comparison Spain has a rate of 35.1 dpmp, France had a rate of 22.2 dpmp, the USA had a rate of 21.4 dpmp and the UK had 10.7 dpmp in 2005.

At 35.1 dpmp, Spain has the highest rate of organ donation in the developed world as every person who dies is considered as a potential donor. This level of national

support has been achieved through government legislation, professional education and ongoing community awareness campaigns.

The average age of organ donors in Australia last year was 42.5 years. From 1989 until 2006, 40 per cent of organ and tissue donors were female and 60 per cent male. Cerebrovascular accident (stroke) caused 49 per cent of all organ donor deaths and road accidents caused 25 per cent.

The most common reason families decline to donate their deceased relative's organs and tissue is because they don't know if their relative wished to donate their organs or not. This is also one of the reasons why Australia's donation rate is so low, as we don't like to talk about death, and therefore, organ donation.

What is the Australian Organ Donor Register?

The Australian Organ Donor Register (AODR) was established in 2000 as a confidential list of all Australians who have registered as organ and tissue donors. The AODR is administered by Medicare Australia on behalf of the Australian Government. Medicare Australia does not organise transplants and has no involvement in deciding who should receive organ or tissue transplants. If you die in circumstances where organ and tissue donation is possible, authorised medical personnel who have signed confidentiality agreements can access the AODR after your death and inform your family of your wishes.

Are there age restrictions for registering as an organ donor?

If you're aged 18 years or over, you can register your consent to donate your organs or tissue on the AODR. Equally, you can register your objection. If you're aged between 16 and 17 years, you can register your intention to donate on the AODR. Individuals under 18 years can still become donors if a family member gives their consent.

Where can I register to be an organ donor?

Organ and tissue donor consent registration forms may be obtained at any Medicare office in Australia or by calling 1800 777 203. Alternatively registration can be made online by visiting the Australian Organ Donor Register (AODR) at www.medicareaustralia.gov.au. Further information is available at Australians Donate website at www.australiansdonate.org.au.

It's important to share your decision to donate with family and friends. Those who are registered with the AODR will receive an aqua coloured Australian Organ Donor Register Card (below).



Unless you have this new Organ Donor Register Card you have not given consent to donate only 'intent'.

If in the past you ticked your drivers licence, this is no longer enough, you must register and sign the form provided with your licence renewal or through Medicare (except NSW where you can still register through licence renewal).

In March 2007, 5,680,851 Australians were registered on the Australian Organ Donor Register, of which the majority are only listed as 'intent'. **951,417** of these people have given full signed consent and have an aqua coloured Organ Donor Card.

What is organ and tissue donation?

Organ and tissue donation is a medical process whereby specific organs and tissues are removed from the body of a deceased donor for transplantation into someone else, in order to save or improve the recipient's life. Yet, it is much more than simply a medical procedure. It is a profoundly generous act on the part of an individual or family, which can transform the lives of people suffering debilitating or terminal illnesses. Anecdotally, we know families often feel empowered by the chance to fulfil the wishes of their loved one at a time of deep tragedy and personal loss.

Which organs and tissue can be donated after death?

In Australia, the heart, liver, lungs, kidneys and pancreas can be donated. Tissue that can be donated includes the cornea (the clear film on the front of the eye), bone tissue, heart valves and skin tissue. It is up to you to determine which organs and tissue you would like to donate and to formally record your instructions on the AODR and your wishes will be respected.

Why can't everyone donate their organs when they die?

Under Australian law, a person can only be declared dead if they have suffered cardiac (heart failure) or brain death.

When someone suffers a cardiac death the blood immediately stops flowing, damaging the organs and making them unfit for transplantation. If the person suffers brain death while on 'ventilation', the blood will continue to provide oxygen to the organs and keep them in a state suitable for transplantation. Only around one per cent of people will die in these circumstances.

Why can I donate my tissue even if I don't die through brain death?

Unlike organs, tissue remains suitable for donation for many hours after the heart stops beating and can be stored prior to transplantation. Eye tissue can be stored for up to seven days while heart valves, bone and skin may be stored for several years.

How many people can receive organs?

Up to ten other people can receive your organs and tissue, but it is up to you to decide which organs and tissue you want to donate. The number of people who receive your organs will depend on the number of organs you wish to donate and the number of suitable recipients at the time.

Who needs an organ or tissue transplant?

Most people who need an organ transplant have a serious illness or are in the end stages of a disease which means one or more of their organs is no longer working properly. Those people who need heart valves often suffer from degenerative valves, abnormalities or disease such as rheumatic fever. People with eye disease, such as glaucoma, or who suffer from blindness, can be helped by corneal transplants. Burns and accident victims need skin grafts. The donation of bone can greatly assist people who have suffered trauma or have bone cancer.

Can I become an organ donor?

Most people have the potential to be an organ or tissue donor - you shouldn't assume that you aren't healthy enough or that you are too young or too old. However there are certain factors that will be considered when determining if a person is an appropriate organ donor. These include:

- the circumstances of how, where and when a person dies
- any past medical history
- age is considered, but it is more important to assess how the organs are working/functioning

If a person has HIV/AIDS or cancer they generally cannot donate their organs or tissue as there is a risk of transferring the disease to the donor recipient. However, you may still be a donor if you smoke, wear glasses, drink alcohol or regularly take medication.

What happens to me if I suffer a fatal brain injury?

To donate organs (heart, liver, lungs, pancreas, kidneys), brain death will generally have to occur in a hospital, typically in an intensive care unit. The absence of brain function and lack of blood flow to the brain indicate that death has occurred.

Two appropriately qualified doctors who are not involved in transplantation will perform tests independently of each other and certify the brain is so severely injured that it can no longer function, and declare brain death. Family members can request to be present at these tests.

While the deceased is on a ventilator, the organs continue to function as long as the heart continues to circulate blood around the body. After brain death is confirmed, the family will be asked to consider organ donation. The AODR will be accessed to determine if any intentions regarding organ donation had been previously recorded. If organ donation proceeds, the deceased remains attached to the ventilator while arrangements are made to identify potential recipients.

How likely am I to become an organ or tissue donor?

Less than one per cent of all Australians will die in circumstances where organ donation can occur. Tissue donation, however, can occur in a much wider range of circumstances—you don't need to die in hospital to donate tissue and there is usually more time to arrange for the necessary medical procedures to take place.

Are all donated organs and tissues used?

Organs and tissue must be in good condition and working well before they can be transplanted into another person. After a person dies, medical checks and tests are

done to see if the person is medically suitable. Sometimes donation is not possible (for example, the person may have had an undiagnosed illness or their organs may be medically unsuitable for transplantation.)

Can I choose who will get my organs and tissues?

With the exception of living kidney donors, no. The law currently protects the confidentiality of both the donor and their family and the transplant recipients.

Can I donate my organs while I'm still alive?

It is possible to be a living kidney donor (for example, a family member or friend who donates one of their kidneys to a family member or friend). Around 30 per cent of kidney transplants carried out in Australia each year are now done this way.

Who decides who will receive a donated organ or tissue? What are the selection criteria?

Organs such as the heart, lungs, liver and pancreas are matched to recipients by blood group and weight. For kidneys, blood groups must match but weight is not relevant. A person's age and gender are not relevant. To find the specific guidelines regarding organ allocation visit the Transplant Society of Australia and New Zealand (TSANZ) website www.racp.edu.au/tsanz.

Is organ and tissue donation safe?

Australia has one of the highest transplant success rates in the world. Transplant teams are highly trained and dedicated to providing the best service possible, both for donor families and the recipients of organ and tissue transplants.

If I say I want to be an organ or tissue donor, will my body be used for research purposes instead?

No. Medical research requires separate and specific authorisation and is distinct from donation for transplantation. The donation of your whole body to science is arranged by contacting the anatomy department at the medical school within your state. These arrangements are generally made by the person before death, and are totally separate from organ donation for transplantation purposes.

How are organs and tissue removed?

Removal of organs and tissue is the same as any other surgical operation, and is performed by highly skilled surgeons. The donor's body is treated with respect and dignity at all times.

After the operation, the donor's family is able to see their relative again if they wish. If a person is donating tissue but not organs, the tissue may be removed in a mortuary under sterile conditions by trained technicians. If a post-mortem examination is to be carried out this will be done after the tissue donation operation.

If I donate my organs will my body look different?

The donation of organs and tissue does not alter the physical shape of the body.

Will my family know who receives my organs and tissues after death? Can they meet the recipients?

No. Under Australian law, all details of donors and recipients are kept confidential. Medical personnel and the staff of organ donation agencies are not allowed to reveal any information that may help to identify either a donor or a recipient. However, it is possible for donor families and organ or tissue recipients to write to each other anonymously if they wish. Such correspondence is coordinated by the state organ donation agencies. For many people this can be a very emotional and rewarding process while other families may choose not to take this step for their own personal reasons. Guidelines are available from transplant units and organ donation agencies in each state.

How many people are waiting for organs and tissue donations in Australia?

Generally, there are around 2000 people waiting for organ transplants at any one time, with the largest number of people urgently needing kidney transplants. The number of people who require tissue transplants is even greater.

How long do people wait for an organ or tissue transplant?

Some people may receive a donor organ very quickly, but a typical waiting time is more than three years. The length of time a person has to wait depends on a number of factors. Tragically, some people will die before a suitable organ or tissue becomes available.

How long has Australia been doing organ or tissue transplants?

Corneal transplants to save eyesight started in 1941. The first successful kidney transplant was done in 1965.

Who is responsible for organ and tissue donation in Australia?

A complex network of organisations work together to ensure Australia's organ and tissue donation sector operates effectively. This includes hospitals, state health departments and organ donation services, tissue banks, Medicare's Australian Organ Donor Register and Australians Donate.

Professional associations and many community groups also play an active role in promoting organ and tissue donation and helping families to adjust to life after an organ transplant.

Agencies in each state and territory are responsible for managing the process of organ and tissue donation. They work closely with hospitals and tissue banks to facilitate transplants from donated organs and tissue, and ensure the families of potential donors are supported and informed about all aspects of organ and tissue donation. All agencies provide follow-up support and counselling for families who have taken part in Australia's donation programs.