

Where can I get more information?

If you need more information ask your doctor or nurse.

This brochure is designed to supplement discussions with your doctor about blood transfusions. If you have any questions about what you have read in this brochure or any other concerns, please discuss them with you doctor or nurse.

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Key Facts to Know About Blood Transfusions

*Health and Social
Services*



The purpose of this pamphlet is to assist patients and their families make appropriate decisions about their medical care and treatment when involving blood transfusions.

What is a transfusion?

A transfusion occurs when any part of the blood (blood products) is added to another person's blood system.

When are transfusions needed?

Some medical illnesses can lead to critical losses of blood or some components of the blood. Blood and blood products are a critical part of everyday medical care, such as major surgeries and other medical procedures.

Organ transplants, cancer therapy, heart surgery, treatment for anemia, support for patients with blood disorders, resuscitation of trauma victims, and the care and survival of premature infants are just a few examples of medical procedures requiring blood transfusions.

What are blood and blood products?

Red blood cells are the most well known part of the blood. These cells give blood its red colour and carry oxygen throughout the body.

Another type of blood component is called platelet. These sticky cells start blood clotting after injury.

The yellow coloured liquid of blood is called plasma. Plasma can be separated from the red cells and is used to make about 30 other products. Some of these products are used to treat people with hemophilia. Other special proteins in plasma are called immunoglobulins and help fight infection.

Where does the blood come from?

All blood transfused in Canada comes from volunteer donors. All potential donors are screened by completing a written questionnaire, followed by an interview with a nurse.

How is the blood tested?

Once the blood is collected, it is tested by the Canadian Blood Services for several viruses and other infections:

- C Hepatitis B*
- C Hepatitis C*
- C Human Immunodeficiency Virus 1 (HIV 1 and 2 the AIDS viruses)*
- C Human T Cell Lymphotropic Virus 1 (HTLV-1)*
- C Syphilis*

What are the risks of a transfusion?

There also may be viruses we know nothing about. The risks are decreasing because screening tests are improving all the time. You can get more information about the risks from your doctor.

A small number of patients will develop a reaction. This is usually not serious. An allergic reaction is where you might feel itchy or get a rash. Another type of reaction may cause you to feel cold or hot. Less frequent, serious reactions such as breathing problems can occur during or after your transfusion.

You should let your doctor know if you have had a reaction from a blood transfusion in the past, so that steps can be taken to prevent it from recurring.

What happens when I need a transfusion?

A blood sample will be taken from you and sent to the hospital laboratory. Tests are performed to ensure the donor blood you may receive is compatible with your blood. The donor blood is then labeled with your name and you will receive only that blood. The blood (or blood product) is given to you through a needle, usually into a vein in your arm. During your transfusion, the nurse will take your temperature, blood pressure and pulse. The blood transfusion can take from 30 minutes to several hours.

What if I have other concerns?

You may be worried about feeling squeamish at the sight of blood or afraid of needles. Tell the doctor or nurse your concerns. They are health care professionals and are there to help.