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Frequently Asked Questions About Organ Donation for Older Adults

Organ donation is the act of taking healthy organs and tissues from one person and giving them to someone else. Making the decision to donate your organs is one of the most generous gifts you can give.

Find answers below to commonly asked questions about what it means to be a donor and how to become one. You'll also find a list of federal resources to help you learn more about the donation process and how to get started.

Is there an age limit to becoming an organ donor?

No: There is no age limit for donation or to sign up. In 2021, one out of every three people who donated organs was over the age of 50. You're never too old to make a difference — as of 2021, the oldest organ donor in the United States was 92.

How can someone register to be an organ donor?

You can register to be an organ donor at the time you renew your driver's license or state ID at your local Department of Motor Vehicles. You can also [register online](#).

Sign up now to be an organ, eye, and tissue donor!

Visit organdonor.gov to select your state and follow the steps to sign up.

Is my brain included when I sign up to donate my organs?

No. It's common for people to think that signing up to be an organ donor includes brain donation, but the purpose and the process are different. This is because brain donation is only used to advance scientific research, versus helping another person stay alive through a transplant. Depending on the circumstances of death, it may be possible to donate organs for transplant as well as the brain for scientific research.

Brain donation is important in helping researchers to better understand how different disorders, like Alzheimer's disease and related dementias, affect the brain, and how we might better treat and prevent them across different groups of people.

To learn more about the brain donation process, why many brains are needed from diverse populations and ages, and how to become a brain donor, visit NIA's article — [Brain Donation: A Gift for Generations](#).

What happens after I sign up to be an organ donor?

After you sign up to be an organ donor, be sure to tell your family and friends. It's important to let them know your wishes so they can honor your decision at the end of life. Also be sure to keep your information, such as a current mailing address, up to date in your state's donor registry.

Who is responsible for determining if organs can be donated?

Organ Procurement Organizations (OPOs) are nonprofit organizations responsible for recovering organs from donors for transplantation in the United States. If you are near death or die, the hospital informs the local OPO. The OPO decides if you're a possible donor based on your medical and social history.

Organ Donation and Transplantation: How Does it Work?



Can I donate an organ or tissue while I'm still living?

Most donations occur after the donor has died, but it is possible to donate certain organs or tissue to someone in need while still living. Living donation has a different process than that of a deceased donor donation. To learn more about living donation, visit organdonor.gov.

Do any medical conditions exclude someone from becoming an organ donor?

Yes, some conditions such as an actively spreading cancer or infection, or heart disease, may prevent a person from becoming a donor. But you can still sign up as an organ donor regardless of any preexisting or past medical conditions. A doctor will conduct tests to determine the viability of your organs for transplant at the time of death.

Does it cost money to donate your organs?

No. The organ donor's family is not charged for donation. Insurance or the people who receive the organ donation pay those costs. However, the donor's family is still responsible for any costs associated with medical care at the end of life, and funeral and burial arrangements.

Can family members choose to donate their loved one's organs after they die?

If a person is not registered to donate their organs, their family may make the decision on the dying person's behalf to donate their organs. A member of the OPO must obtain consent from the family before organ donation. However, the family cannot override the person's decision to donate their organs if they have registered to donate or stated it in their advance directives.

It can be challenging to think about organ donation at the end of life, both for the family and the person who is dying. Making and documenting this decision ahead of time as part of [advance care planning](#) and by registering to donate can help lessen stress during a difficult time.

Is organ donation possible if someone prefers to die at home?

In most cases, organ donation is not logistically possible when someone dies at home. Vital organs — such as the heart, lungs, kidneys, and liver — are only viable for a short time once oxygen stops flowing through the body. However, tissue and eye donation may be an option since these remain viable without oxygen for several hours.

Can a person have a viewing if they donate their organs?

Yes, it is possible to have an open casket funeral, or viewing, after organ donation. Hospital workers treat the body with care and respect during the donation process.

Organ donation resources

- NIH National Library of Medicine:
 - Find [resources for organ donation and organ transplantation](#).
- Health Resources & Services Administration:
 - Explore [Is There an Age Limit for Organ Donation?](#)
 - Read personal stories from [individuals who donated and received organs](#).
 - View these [free print and web materials](#) to help encourage older adults to donate.
 - Learn more about organ donation and transplantation by [watching these videos](#).
 - Read about [organ donation statistics](#) on how many people are waiting for a transplant, who receives an organ, and which organs are most needed.
 - Find [donation after life information](#) on registration, donation authorization, how donors are matched to recipients, what happens when doctors remove and transplant organs, and more.
- Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network:
 - Learn about the organ donation and transplantation process and the [national waiting list](#) for organs.

You may also be interested in

- Learning more about [advance directives](#)

- Reading about [preparing a living will](#)
- Finding out about [brain donation](#)

For more information on organ donation and transplantation

MedlinePlus

National Library of Medicine

www.medlineplus.gov

OrganDonor.gov

Health Resources & Services Administration

www.organdonor.gov

Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network

Health Resources & Services Administration

<https://optn.transplant.hrsa.gov>

This content is provided by the NIH National Institute on Aging (NIA). NIA scientists and other experts review this content to ensure it is accurate and up to date.

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