



Living organ donation

Let's learn more



The foundation of kidney care.

■ Introduction

This brochure is about living organ donation, particularly living kidney donation. Deciding to become a living kidney donor is a very personal decision and you have to make the choice that's right for you.

There are two types of organ donation: *living donation* happens when someone voluntarily donates an organ (usually a kidney) or part of an organ (such as the liver or lung) 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 represents the best possible improvement to health and quality of life for many people living with kidney failure. The only other life-sustaining treatment is dialysis to artificially clean the blood.

■ Facing the facts

The need for organs for transplantation is far greater than the available supply. Over 3,000 Canadians are on a waiting list for kidney transplantation. Some will die waiting. Expected wait time can vary from a few months to several years, depending on a variety of factors.

Living donation of kidneys is fast out-pacing deceased donation as a source of organs, but both kinds of organ donation combined still do not meet the need for kidneys for transplantation.

■ Kidney transplants are highly successful

Kidney transplantation is a very successful and accepted treatment. The success rate for a transplant from a living donor is high: 90–95% of these kidneys are working well after one year and will last on average from 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 a person can live a healthy life with one. Living donation occurs when a person freely decides to donate one of their kidneys to someone in need of a transplant. This compassionate gesture offers the individual waiting for a transplant an alternative to dialysis or a deceased donor transplant.

Donating a kidney is the most frequent 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 comes most often from a family member such as a parent, child, brother or sister. A donor can also be a spouse, friend or co-worker. Or it can be a stranger. A genetic link between donor and recipient, although beneficial, is not always required. This is largely 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 16–19 depending on your province, and living donors are usually less than 70 years of age. They must be in good general health with no

evidence of significant high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, kidney disease, heart disease or hepatitis.

Several tests will be necessary to determine if their kidney is compatible with the intended recipient.

■ Some advantages of living kidney donation

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

Less waiting. The length of time the recipient waits for an organ is shorter when the organ comes from a living donor. Also, other recipients on the transplant waiting list who do not have a living donor themselves, move up the transplant waiting list once the recipient of the living donor kidney is removed from the list.

Avoidance of dialysis. With a living donor kidney, the transplant surgery may take place earlier in the course of the kidney disease, perhaps even before the person begins dialysis treatments.

Better donor organ survival rates.

The transplanted kidney often lasts longer than a kidney from a deceased donor, is usually healthier, and often works right away.

Feeling of satisfaction. For the donor, it is a very positive psychological experience knowing that he or she has helped someone in need.

■ How to become a living donor

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

If you are considering donating to someone you know, ask them if they are willing to consider you as a donor. Some people living with kidney failure decide *not* to have a transplant, or they decide *not* to have a living donor. Their decision should always be respected—it is their right to decide against a transplant or to decline a living donor organ. If the person declines your offer, it takes nothing away from your generous offer. The decisions, rights and feelings of both parties should be respected.

■ The evaluation process

The evaluation process is lengthy—perhaps as long as six months. Many tests are done to determine if the potential donor is healthy enough to donate a kidney and will be a good match for the potential recipient. These tests include: blood type compatibility, assessment of general health, further compatibility tests and others to determine the health of the donor kidney. Also, a psychosocial assessment of the potential donor takes place to give them an opportunity to discuss their feelings or any concerns. This assessment also makes sure the donor has all the necessary information to make a decision, and receives emotional support throughout the process.

These investigations and appointments may be time consuming. They may also require travel and time off work as the living donor candidate meets with different members of the healthcare team such as nephrologists, transplant surgeons, transplant coordinators, social workers, etc.

■ Risks

Living kidney donation does not change a person's overall life expectancy, nor does it affect a person's ability to have children. As with any major surgery, there are risks of physical 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 injuring the remaining kidney; after donation, contact sports should be avoided
- 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, the donor will have to pay any *non-medical* costs such as travel expenses, out-of-pocket costs, and any additional child-care costs. In addition, there may be possible loss of salary for time off work for recovery from the surgery, unless there is sick leave coverage available from the donor's company health plan. Since some provinces do reimburse *some of the non-medical* expenses, the donor should speak to the social worker or Living Donor Coordinator at the transplant center to find out more.

Potential living donors should also check with their insurance provider concerning life insurance, private health insurance or travel insurance policies to obtain all the facts.

■ Making the decision

Making the decision to become a living kidney donor is probably one of the biggest decisions a person can make during their lifetime.

The decision must be a well-informed one that is “right” for the potential donor. Whether someone is asked to consider donating one of their kidneys, or comes forward of their own accord, it is natural to have some concerns about the decision. There are many factors to consider including the risks and benefits of donation, and the emotional and practical impact the donation will have on the donor, their family, work and social life.

More than one potential donor?

Sometimes there is more than one willing donor for a specific recipient. For example, several family members or friends may be willing donors and suitable candidates. To see who might be best suited to donate their kidney, all aspects of living donation must be considered: physical, emotional, financial and practical. The healthcare team will help with the evaluation.

People to talk to. The final decision belongs to the donor alone. But getting some informed help, and discussing thoughts, feelings and questions can help the donor to see just how prepared they are to donate a kidney. People to talk with include:

- Family members and close friends
- Religious or spiritual advisor
- Financial advisor
- Someone who has donated a kidney. The Kidney Foundation's KIDNEY CONNECT Peer Support Program matches potential living donors with someone who has had the experience of donating 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

Some questions for the 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 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 long will it take after surgery to resume working?
- What is my relationship with the recipient? Will it be different afterwards?
- Who will take care of my regular household responsibilities during evaluation, surgery and recovery?
Child care and pet care responsibilities?
Household chores? Cleaning and cooking? Transportation?

Choosing to donate. Once the decision is made to donate a kidney, the surgery is scheduled and both parties are admitted to the hospital for final testing before the surgery. If at that time there are concerns about the health of the donor or the recipient, the surgery may be postponed or cancelled.

Choosing not to donate. If a potential donor chooses not to donate, the healthcare team will support and respect this decision. They will also help the person communicate the decision to the potential recipient and family members in such a way as to preserve harmony.

Changing your mind. The donor can change their mind at any time during the evaluation process and the healthcare team will support the decision.

■ The surgery & follow-up

Living kidney donation surgery can be done via traditional open surgery or the newer laparoscopic technique available in some transplant centers. The healthcare team will discuss with the potential donor the benefits and risks of both types of procedure, 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 and the person remains in hospital for four to six days afterward. Six to twelve weeks are needed for full recovery, although the individual may return to work after four to six weeks if their job is fairly sedentary and does not require heavy lifting or physical activity.

Laparoscopic nephrectomy. This is sometimes also called “keyhole surgery”. The operation takes about three to four hours, followed by a hospital stay of three to four days. The individual can usually return to work and a normal routine in three to four weeks, although if their 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 quicker recovery for the donor.

Follow-up care. The donor sees the surgeon again about two weeks after the surgery, and other members of the healthcare team (such as nephrologists, nurses, social worker, etc.) about six to nine weeks after the surgery. Blood and urine tests will be done to make sure the 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 the donor's family doctor or through the transplant center. Donors should also adopt a healthy lifestyle and maintain an appropriate weight to promote long-term health.

A few general precautions. In general, donors should avoid rough contact sports (such as football and hockey) that could damage the remaining kidney. Pregnancy should be postponed for at least six months after the surgery. The donor should continue to have an annual physical exam including blood and urine tests.

■ 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.

■ The Kidney Foundation of Canada's commitment

The Kidney Foundation of Canada is working with representatives from healthcare, industry and government to improve organ donation rates.

The Foundation encourages 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 office of The Kidney Foundation of Canada, an organ transplant center, or your family doctor.

The Kidney Foundation

OUR VISION

Kidney health, and improved lives for all people affected by kidney disease.

OUR MISSION

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

- funding and stimulating innovative research;
- providing education and support;
- promoting access to high quality healthcare; and
- increasing public awareness and commitment to advancing kidney health and organ donation.

For further information, or if you wish to help us in our efforts, please contact The Kidney Foundation of Canada office in your area. You can also visit our Web site at **www.kidney.ca**.

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