

The Basic Path of Organ Donation

The donation process begins with a decision. You decide you want to help people with end-stage disease by donating your organs when you die. Your body, after all, is finished with them.

When your time comes, perhaps decades later, your organs may be used to save many lives. People most frequently become donors following a stroke, heart attack or severe head injury.

Even though cases vary, the following describes the basic steps in donation after an accident.

Transport



A specialized team of EMTs and paramedics begin lifesaving efforts at the scene. They also contact emergency-room doctors during transport.

Treatment



When the team arrives, ER doctors and nurses have advanced life-support equipment ready. They evaluate injuries and continue lifesaving measures, including a ventilator, IV fluid, blood replacement and drugs to help the heart keep beating.

Intensive Care



After vital signs stabilize, the patient is transferred to the ICU, where a doctor performs special tests to see how much damage has been done to the brain and organs. The medical team continues advanced life-support during the tests.

Consent Given



The doctor talks to the family about the patient's death. Then, someone from the OPO or specially trained hospital staff talks to the family about donation. The family is given time to think and ask questions about it before they decide.

Evaluation



For registered donors, a specially trained nurse from the organ procurement organization (OPO) goes to the hospital to see if the patient is medically suitable to be a donor.

Brain Death Declared



Brain death is diagnosed as an irreversible loss of blood flow to the brain, causing the brain to die. After brain death, the donor's body is kept functioning by artificial means, such as ventilator support.

YES! I want to register as an organ donor.



The decision is easier if the patient is listed on the state donor registry, and if the family had previously discussed donation. Visit www.donatelife.net to register as an organ donor.

Placement



The donor's blood type, height, weight, the hospital ZIP code and other data are entered into UNOS' national computer system—the beginning of organ allocation. Appropriate candidates are found for whom the donor's organs are the best match. Timing is especially important at this step and during recovery.

Organ Recovery



The donor is taken to an operating room, where organs are surgically removed by a transplant surgeon. After the organs are "recovered," they are taken to the transplant hospitals where the candidates are waiting.

Follow-Up



A few weeks later, the OPO sends a letter to the donor's family, explaining which organs were transplanted but keeping confidential recipients' names. Most OPOs continue to provide support to donor families, such as bereavement counseling and, later, memorial events.

Funeral

After donation, the donor is taken to a funeral home, and the OPO works with the funeral director to avoid delays in the funeral. Because organ donation is rarely disfiguring, the family can have an open casket.

