

When you have a blood transfusion

It is vital that staff carefully check your identity to ensure that you receive the correct blood. There are strict identity checks before and at the beginning of the transfusion. If you feel unwell or have any concerns during the transfusion you should immediately alert a staff member.

Sometimes symptoms can develop some time after the transfusion. If you have returned home, and you become unwell or develop a temperature of 38.0 or higher within 72 hours of receiving the transfusion please go to your emergency department and let them know that you have had a recent transfusion.

What can we all do to make sure that a safe supply of blood is available?

It is important that healthy Australians donate blood. This helps ensure a safe and adequate blood supply, which saves many lives each year.

Blood transfusion *checklist*

- ◆ **Do you understand why you may need a blood transfusion?**
Your doctor should explain why a transfusion has been recommended. You can ask about your haemoglobin level.
- ◆ **Have the risks been explained?**
The risks and benefits of transfusion for your condition should be clearly explained.
- ◆ **Have alternatives been discussed?**
Possible alternatives to transfusion should always be considered and discussed with you by your doctor.
- ◆ **Have your questions been answered?**
It is important that your questions about the transfusion have been answered. It may help to have a family member or friend with you when you talk to your doctor.

Adapted with kind permission of BloodWatch from the patient information brochure 'Blood Transfusion' endorsed by the Clinical Excellence Commission, ARCBS and NSW Health.

Copies of this brochure are available from;

Email: palms@nscchahs.health.nsw.gov.au

Web-site: www.palms.com.au

Translated Blood Transfusion brochures are available from: www.mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au

Benefit from public pathology

The brochure is a guide only. Please consult your medical practitioner to make sure the information is right for you and to assist you with any decisions you may need to make.

Blood transfusion

Answers to some common questions for you and your family



Who needs a blood transfusion?

Blood transfusion is important in the treatment of many medical problems such as cancer and blood disorders, and in the treatment of some injuries and major surgical procedures.

What is a blood transfusion?

A blood transfusion occurs when donated blood is transfused into your bloodstream. When blood is donated it is separated into its different parts or components. It is one of these components which is used in transfusion.

Blood components include:

Red blood cells carry haemoglobin (Hb) that delivers oxygen to your tissues and organs. Red blood cells may be given in an emergency, if you are bleeding, or if your haemoglobin levels are very low (anaemia). Your doctor will decide if you need a transfusion by considering the reason for your anaemia, the level of haemoglobin in your blood, your medical condition and any other symptoms (eg breathlessness, chest pain or dizziness).

Generally, if your haemoglobin level is:

- below 70 g/L: a transfusion is often needed
- between 70 and 100 g/L: transfusion may be necessary
- above 100 g/L: transfusion is not usually necessary.

Platelets help to stop bleeding by helping your blood to clot. A platelet transfusion may be needed when your platelet numbers are too low or when your platelets don't work properly. This may be because of a disease or a side effect of medication.

Plasma works with platelets to clot blood and seal wounds. It is often used in emergencies to help stop bleeding.

Where does transfusion blood come from?

In Australia we take strict precautions to ensure blood is as safe as possible. Blood is collected only from suitable volunteer donors. Donated blood is extensively tested to check its safety, and blood that fails these tests is not used.

Is blood safe? What are some of the possible risks of blood transfusion?

Although Australia's blood supply is very safe, as with all medical procedures, blood transfusion is not risk free and complications can occur.

- Mild skin reactions or fever occur quite commonly (one to two times every one hundred transfusions), however they are usually mild and temporary. Patients who receive regular transfusions are more at risk of such reactions.
- Severe reactions are very uncommon, but can result in major consequences and, rarely even death
- Immune or allergic reactions to donated blood may occur and there may be an increased risk of post operative infection and longer hospital stay for surgical patients.
- Despite screening of all blood donations, the risk of transferring infectious agents cannot be ruled out completely. The risk is extremely low.

Alternatives to blood transfusion

As blood transfusion is not risk free, it is important to consider alternatives to transfusion, and ways of reducing the amount of blood used. Alternatives include:

- detecting and treating anaemia before planned surgery
- surgical methods which prevent or reduce bleeding
- collecting blood lost in surgery and returning it to the patient
- new treatments to reduce the need for transfusion

These alternatives may not be available or possible in your particular situation. However, you may want to ask your doctor if there is anything which could be used for your condition to reduce the need for transfusion.

Providing blood for yourself - autologous donation

Patients sometimes ask if they can give their own blood before surgery to be used instead of donor blood: this is called autologous donation. Although use of autologous collection and transfusion may sound risk free, it is not. Collection of your blood before surgery is therefore not generally recommended except in special situations, e.g. rare groups when it may be very difficult to obtain matched blood.

Giving your consent

You should make sure you understand the reasons, risks and benefits when you are asked to give your consent for a transfusion. If you have any objection it is extremely important to discuss it with your doctor. In an emergency it may not be possible to obtain your consent, but the reasons should be explained to you when you are recovering.