

Frequently asked questions by consumers regarding blood transfusion



Why do I need a transfusion?

Don't be afraid to ask why you need a transfusion.

Your doctor can tell you why you need a blood transfusion and what sort of blood product you may need.

Some common reasons for a transfusion are:

- an accident or major surgery where you have lost some of your blood
- an operation where you have lost some of your blood
- an illness that affects the way your blood cells work
- treatment for cancer that affects the way your body makes blood cells
- blood loss caused by some other illness or condition.

The type of blood product you need will depend on your illness or injury.

What happens first?

First your doctor writes a form requesting you have a blood test to determine your blood group and to find out what antibodies you have in your blood. Antibodies are proteins that we all have that circulate in our blood.

A small blood sample is taken from your vein by a nurse so that your blood group can be determined.

The nurse will ask you to state your name and date of birth. She/he may also ask you to spell out your name to ensure the correct spelling goes on the blood sample. There may be other patients with very similar names to yours who may even have the same date of birth. Even if you are known to staff, this accurate identification is a vital step to ensure your safety and is a step that should not be missed.

This blood test is analysed in a laboratory by a scientist, this is an important part of ensuring the blood transfusion process is safe. Depending on what proteins (antibodies) are found in your blood will determine the length of time this analysis takes.

You may be blood group O, A, B, or AB. You may also be either positive or negative for the Rhesus factor. When this is determined, your blood is also tested for other antibodies that need to be matched to the donor blood.

This does not mean you will necessarily have blood but there is a possibility that you will and in this case the right blood will be tested and available for you. Therefore you should ask the doctor all your questions as to why you may need it and what the risks of having a blood transfusion are, so that you are prepared. Refer to the pamphlet Patient information brochure- blood transfusion, for a list of questions you may like to have answered to ensure you have been given enough information.

If you have any religious, physical or lifestyle reasons for not accepting a blood transfusion please let your doctor know now.

When do I receive the blood?

There are many factors which determine how long it will take to receive the blood once the doctor has decided to order the transfusion. These include:

- the amount of time it takes to analyse your blood in the scientific laboratory and this depends on what is found in your blood (i.e. which antibodies)
- where the blood has to come from, there may or may not be blood stored in the hospital that is a compatible match to your blood.

It is important to know that if you require blood urgently to save your life there are systems in-place where blood that is safe for you can be organised for transfusion without delay.

How do I receive the blood?

Two nurses will check the product at your bedside, asking you again to state your name and date of birth.

Because there are many people with similar names and the same date of birth, all details must match exactly or the blood product cannot be commenced. Even though you may be known to the staff, this check step is for your safety and must be done.

The labels on the unit of blood product will also be checked carefully against details on your wristband and the paperwork that comes with the blood bag.

The blood will be infused into your veins through a needle attached to a line connecting to the blood bag, in other words via an intravenous infusion (IV).

How long does it all take?

Red cells usually take between two and three hours per unit to give, platelets usually 20 to 30 minutes per unit and plasma also 20 to 30 minutes per unit.

They can be given as fast as you can safely tolerate, but cannot take longer than four hours as there is increased risk of transfusion reaction after this time period. After four hours the unit must come down, and if you need more, a fresh unit will be given to you.

How will I feel during that time?

As with all medical treatments there are some side effects that may occur during or after the blood product transfusion. You may experience:

- hot, flushes or cold, chills
- rash, hives
- nausea, vomiting
- shortness of breath
- blood in your urine
- back pain
- light headedness or dizziness

Your nurse will keep a close eye on you during the transfusion - taking your temperature, pulse and blood pressure before you start the transfusion and several times during the transfusion.

If you feel unwell at any time, please notify the nurse, even if she/he has just seen you.

At any time during your transfusion be sure to ask your nurse or doctor if you would like more information.

If you would like further information please also refer to the document *Blood transfusion: Have all your questions been answered?*