

Giving your consent

If you are told that you need a blood transfusion, you should ask your doctor why it is necessary. You have the right to refuse a blood transfusion but you need to be fully aware and understand the consequences of doing so.

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

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

It is important that all healthy eligible individuals donate blood regularly. This will ensure that the national blood supplies are always safe and adequate.

BLOOD TRANSFUSION

checklist

- ☐ Do you understand why you need a blood transfusion? Your doctor should explain why a transfusion has been recommended. You can ask about your haemoglobin level.
- ☐ Have the risks of transfusion been explained? The risks and benefits of transfusion for your condition should be clearly explained.
- ☐ Have alternatives been discussed? Alternatives to transfusion should always be considered and discussed with you by your doctor.
- ☐ Have all your questions been answered?

Blood transfusion

Things you and your family should know before you receive a blood transfusion

Making a decision to transfuse blood

The decision to transfuse is based on a careful assessment by your doctor indicating that they are necessary for saving life or for preventing a major morbidity.

A blood transfusion is a relatively safe and common procedure in which blood or its products, like platelets or plasma, are given through an intravenous line into one of your veins. However, like any other medical procedures, blood transfusion may occasionally cause adverse effects.

Why may I require a blood transfusion

Most people can tolerate a moderate amount of blood loss without needing a blood transfusion. The volume lost can be replaced by fluids and at the same time, the bone marrow produces more blood cells over the next few weeks. However, when bleeding is severe as in major surgery or accidents, the only way to rapidly replace blood is by a blood transfusion.

Blood transfusions are also required to treat chronic anaemia (lack of red blood cells) and in patients undergoing cancer treatment or bone marrow transplants as the marrow is unable to make its own blood cells.

Is it safe

Every care is taken to ensure blood transfused to patients is as safe as possible. However, despite all care, blood transfusions are not completely risk free. The possibility of getting an infection from a blood transfusion is very low but still cannot be completely eliminated. All blood donors are volunteers and are carefully selected and tested to make sure that the blood they give is as safe as possible.

The biggest risk from a blood donation is being given the wrong blood. Correct identification is essential to prevent an error and ensure that blood meant for someone else is not wrongly given to you. You must always wear an identification band with your correct details. The doctor taking your blood or the nurse administering blood must make sure that your sample is correctly labelled and only blood meant for you is transfused to you. This is done by checking your identification particulars carefully and asking your name in full before a blood sample is taken from you or when a blood transfusion is commenced.

Some people develop mild reactions such as high temperature, chills or a rash which are easily treated. Severe reactions are rare but should be recognised early by medical staff.

What happens before and during a transfusion

Before transfusion, your blood is tested to find out what blood type you have. It is then checked for compatibility with a sample from the donor blood. Only blood found suitable for you by the laboratory will be transfused.

Transfusion of each bag of blood can take up to four hours but can also be given more quickly if needed. You may receive more than one bag of blood during the transfusion.

You will be observed at regular intervals. If you feel unwell during or soon after transfusion, inform a staff member immediately.

Are there alternatives

A blood transfusion is considered only when there are no alternatives. If you have iron deficiency, iron given orally or through your vein can be an alternative. Erythropoietin may help patients with kidney failure. If you are healthy and planned for certain types of surgery, your doctor may recommend autologous transfusion where your own blood may be collected before or during the operation and transfused back to you.