

Q&A Tissue donation

What is the difference between tissue donation and organ donation?

Organ donation (heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, pancreas and small bowel) is only possible from people who have suffered a catastrophic neurological event and are ventilated either in Intensive Care or A&E. Tissue donation (corneas, heart valves, skin & bone) is possible from people who have died regardless of where.

What tissues can be donated?

1. Eye tissue, in particular the cornea and sclera can be donated. The whole eye is removed to prevent damage to the appearance. A plastic cap is inserted over the eye socket and the lid gently closed to maintain form. Corneas can be stored for a maximum of 4 weeks
2. The pulmonary and aortic heart valve can be donated and used interchangeably. The whole heart is retrieved usually at post mortem and dissected at the heart valve bank. A fully histopathological report can be obtained if necessary at this time. Heart valves are cryopreserved and can be stored for up to 5 years.
3. A very fine layer of skin can be donated, thin enough to see through to read a newspaper. The skin is made into a biological dressing and used to treat severe burns. This dressing can be stored for 2-3 years.
4. The femur bone and ligaments attached to the knee joint can be donated. A plastic prosthetic femur bone is inserted and the wound sutured and bandaged. Bone can be made into various forms to be used in reconstructive surgery. Bone is freeze dried and can be stored for 2-3 years. One person's bone donation can be used to treat as many as 30 people.

How long after death is tissue donation possible?

It is possible to retrieve eye, skin and bone within 24 hours after the time of death. Heart valves can be retrieved up to 48 hours after death.

What is the age limits for tissue donation?

There are no upper age limits to eye, skin and bone donation. The oldest cornea donor was 102. Heart valve donation is only possible under 60 years of age.

Eye tissue and heart valves are the tissue appropriate for children. Heart valves can be donated from newborn providing the baby was full term, however there is seldom the demand for newborn valves. More commonly they are required from 6 months of age. The cornea undergoes changes in the first 2 years of life. Under 2 years of age the cornea is conical in shape and not suitable for donation. Again there is seldom the demand for small corneas.

If someone has cancer can they donate tissues?

Eye donation is possible if a person has a diagnosis of solid organ malignancy with or without metastasises. Unfortunately cancers such as leukaemia are not suitable.

How do I find out if someone is suitable for donation before raising the option?

The CAPOD resource folder should have the list of general contraindications for tissue donation (certain infectious diseases, degenerative neurological illnesses including Alzheimer and autoimmune diseases and leukaemia). For further clarity you can check with the East Grinstead eye bank by paging through East Grinstead switchboard 01342 414000

How can I find out whether someone has expressed a wish to donate?

People can express their wish to be considered for donation by either signing on to the NHS Organ Donor Register or by carrying a donor card. The NHS ODR can be checked by a healthcare professional who is telephoning from a hospital – 0117 9757575 (available 24 hours a day). They will require the person's name and date of birth. They will also ask for the name and telephone number of the person enquiring and will phone back with the answer through the hospital switchboard. This is to verify that their request is legitimate

Some people carry organ donor cards on their person and this would also indicate their willingness to be considered for donation.

How can I raise the option of tissue donation with a family?

It is important that families are provided with information about the option of tissue donation within a time frame that allows for coordination of the retrieval, approximately 12 hours. It is not always possible and as healthcare workers supporting the family, you are not able to say with any certainty whether they definitely would be suitable. The following statement could be considered;

"I would like to raise at this time the option of organ and tissue donation. I am aware many people have made their wishes known to their family if they wish to be considered for donation in the event of their death. Is this something that you feel he/she would have wanted you to deal with? It would be tissues in this case for example eye tissue. I am not absolutely sure whether it is possible however I know where I can find the information and very willing to make a phone call on your behalf if you wish to discuss this further with someone. I am raising it at this time because there is a short timeframe with which it is possible"

Who do I contact if a family wish to donate?

The first point of contact is the on call eye retriever at the East Grinstead eye bank contactable through East Grinstead switchboard – 01342 414000, available 24 hours a day. They will assess for suitability and give you advice on what to tell the family. It is important that you document the conversations and

their outcome in the patients medical notes. The family will be contacted by phone by a specialist to discuss the options further and gain consent. Ensure you inform the family of this call.

If the death needs to be reported to the coroner will this affect the ability to donate?

All sudden, and unnatural deaths will require reporting to the Coroner. In order for tissue donation to occur the Coroner must give their consent prior to retrieval. It is important that the doctor reports the death to the Coroner as soon as possible and definitely within the 12 hour period immediately after death. Coroner's consent will be confirmed by the on call tissue retrieval staff.

Do I need to do anything with the deceased before they are transferred to the mortuary?

No, once the referral to the on call eye bank staff has been made and the family are aware that they will be contacted by them the patient should be cared for in accordance with hospital policy. The only addition is to write a note saying 'Mrs/Mr..... is being considered for tissue donation'. This note should be placed in a sealed envelope and given to the porters to place in the mortician's office.

What happens if a family ring back to the ward the following day requesting donation?

If it is within the 24 hour period immediately following death, acknowledge their request and tell them that you will contact the tissue donation specialist and they will ring them back. Ensure you have a telephone number for them. You will need to know the details of the deceased and their medical history, if you are unfamiliar then the deceased's hospital notes can be retrieved from the mortuary. Phone the bereavement office for advice accessing the notes. If donation is not possible because of an obvious contraindication having referred to the on call eye retriever you may need to call the family back giving reasons why this will not be possible.