

COVID-19 and Organ and Tissue Donation

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected organ donation?

The spread of the virus has made it more difficult to find donors whose organs are eligible for successful transplantation. All potential donors are being tested for COVID-19, and organs and tissues from those who test positive are not medically eligible for donation.

Also, access to hospitals has been understandably limited at this time, which presents challenges to monitoring potential donors and discussing the donation option with families.

Can people still get organ transplants right now?

Yes. With any transplant, transplant centers and surgeons work with their patients to weigh the risk of the transplant procedure against the benefit to the patient. Organ transplants never fully stopped during the COVID-19 pandemic but, early on, most procedures were performed on patients who were very sick and had no other option but to go ahead and receive that organ.

With additional safety protocols in place, most hospitals across the country — including here in Michigan — have resumed their pre-COVID-19 transplant schedules.

Gift of Life Michigan is also still working to recover organs and tissue to send to areas of the country that are not as severely afflicted as ours.

What kind of testing is being done?

Testing for infectious diseases is always performed on any potential organ or tissue donor. We added COVID-19 testing to that process when those tests became available in Michigan in March, 2020. We test all potential donors, whether they have symptoms or not, before we proceed with recovery.

Can someone be a donor if they've had COVID-19?

In some cases, yes. Lungs are still automatically ruled out, however, if someone has recovered from COVID-19 and died from something unrelated to the virus, they may be able to donate tissue and other organs, providing:

- 28 days have passed since they recovered from COVID-19
- they had two negative COVID-19 tests
- there were no longer any symptoms

From a transplant perspective, COVID-19 is no different than any other disease or illness. All potential donors are evaluated at the time of death to ensure no illness or disease is passed from a donor to a recipient. Despite the availability of a vaccine, COVID-19 itself does not have an existing treatment or cure, so active cases exclude someone from being an organ, eye or tissue donor.

What are some of the things Gift of Life Michigan is doing to meet the challenges of the pandemic?

Gift of Life has implemented all the recommendations from Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) throughout the response to the pandemic. Administrative and other support staff have been working remotely if they are able to do so. We are taking additional cleaning precautions at our headquarters in Ann Arbor and any onsite staff have been deployed to work areas that allow them to maintain social distancing guidelines.

Our field staff works directly with hospitals to meet their health and safety protocols in order to protect themselves, patients, hospital staff and the communities we serve.

Will there be a shortage of organs in the coming months?

There is always a shortage of organs. In Michigan there are currently nearly 2,800 people waiting for a transplant, and nationwide there are about 113,000 patients on the waiting list. In many areas of the country, organ donation has slowed. Sadly, the shortage may grow, and that's why Gift of Life Michigan continues to do our work and encourage people to register to be donors. When we get through this pandemic, those people who still desperately need an organ transplant are still going to be there.