

# A Patient's Guide to Blood Transfusion



California  
Department of Health Services

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This document provides written information regarding the benefits, risks, and alternatives of transfusion of blood products (including red blood cells, plasma, platelets, or others) collected from the patient (autologous) or another person. This material serves as a supplement to the discussion you have with your physician. It is important that you fully understand this information, so please read this document thoroughly. If you have any questions regarding the procedure, ask your physician prior to consenting to receive a transfusion.

## ■ **Information about the treatment**

Transfusions of blood products are provided to increase the amount of blood components in your body when they are below a reasonable level for your health. The transfusion may be made up of red blood cells, plasma, platelets or other specialized products made from blood. Your physician will decide on the right amount and type of blood product based on your medical condition or diagnosis.

## ■ **Potential benefits of the treatment**

Transfusion of blood products may be necessary to correct low levels of blood components in your body, and may also make you feel better. In some cases, failure to receive transfusion(s) may result in death.

## ■ **Risks of the treatment**

Known risks of this treatment include, but are not limited to:

- Irritation, pain, or infection at the needle site
- Temporary reaction such as a fever, chills, or skin rashes.

Other rare but more serious complications include severe allergic reactions, heart failure due to fluid overload, acute pulmonary edema (fluid leaking into the lungs), hemolysis (destruction of red blood cells), shock, or death.

Transfusion of blood products carries a very small risk of transmission of infectious diseases such as HIV (about 1 in 1.5 million), Hepatitis C (about 1 in 1.2 million), and Hepatitis B (about 1 in 1 million). Other significant infections may also be transmitted by transfusion, but overall this risk is low.

## ■ **Treatment Options/Alternatives**

If you need blood you have several options. Most patients requiring transfusion receive blood products donated by volunteer community donors. These donors are extensively screened about their health history and undergo numerous blood tests as mandated by state and federal regulations in order to ensure the safest possible blood supply. Alternatives to transfusion with blood products from volunteer community donors include:

- Pre-operative autologous donation (using your own previously donated blood), see below for more information
- Directed donation (blood donated by people who you have asked to donate for you), see below for more information
- Intra-operative autologous transfusion/Hemodilution (collecting your own blood during surgery to be given back to you)

- Medications (certain medications may increase blood volume prior to surgery or reduce active bleeding to lessen the need for transfusion)

These options may be available only if your health, time, and procedure permit. They may not be available at all locations or for all patients. You may also choose not to receive blood transfusion; however this decision may hold life-threatening consequences.

Pre-operative autologous donation is not appropriate for all patients. Autologous donation involves collecting your own blood prior to a planned surgery for storage in the hospital blood bank. It is important to discuss with your physician if it is safe for you to donate and the likelihood of needing a transfusion based on your surgery and current transfusion guidelines. Receiving your own blood may reduce, but will not eliminate, the risk of transfusion-related complications. Insurance company policies may vary regarding reimbursement for this service. Overall, although autologous donation is an option to consider for those who qualify, the number of autologous donations in the United States has significantly decreased in the last few decades mainly due to major advances in blood safety and efforts to decrease unnecessary blood transfusions.

Directed donation refers to blood collected from “directed donors” who are donating blood for a specific patient by request. Directed donors are often family and friends of the patient. Directed donors go through the same qualification process as volunteer donors. Directed donations are not considered to be safer than the general blood supply.

**References:**

- Circular of Information for the Use of Human Blood and Blood Components. AABB. Nov 2013 (revised April 2014)
- AABB Technical Manual. 18th Edition.

This brochure is provided as a source of information and is not considered a replacement for the Informed Consent process prior to the transfusion of blood.



This brochure was developed by the California Department of Health Services, Laboratory Field Services (850 Marina Bay Parkway, Richmond, CA 94804)

In partnership with the Medical Technical Advisory Committee of the Blood Centers of California.

For information about brochure contents, please call Laboratory Field Services 213 620-6574.



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