

Talking with children about organ/tissue donation

Organ or tissue donation can bring about strong emotions related to the nature of the death of a loved one as well as identifying the wishes of the living. When explaining organ donation to a child, keep in mind several important considerations:

1. The child's developmental age: A young child can best manage simple and repetitive information. An older child may need more details and be a part of making decisions.
2. The child's relationship with the dying loved one: It's normal for a child to feel protective or possessive about their loved one's body.
3. The medical history: A complicated or traumatic medical experience can impact a child's ability to understand organ/tissue donation.
4. It can be important for a child to understand the gift of donation and the legacy of their dying loved one as well as providing the opportunity of life for others.
5. Be honest with the child about what is happening.
6. Be aware of using sensitive language to describe the process. See the **DEFINITIONS** for help.
7. Seek hospital supports from child life, social work, and spiritual care to help with these conversations.

It is important that a child understands there is a process that includes different medical teams to determine organ/tissue donation. There are several tests of the brain and body that determines if the patient cannot get well—even under the best of care. These tests assure that the brain or heart is unable to recover and that the medical condition is irreversible. From these tests it is decided that the body is unable to breathe or work without the support of medical machines. This is also called brain or cardiac death.

Once brain or cardiac death has been declared, the medical teams work with the donor transplant team to determine what organs/tissue are healthy and qualify for donation. A separate medical team using a computer data base identifies who will receive the organs/tissue. The person receiving the donation (the recipient) is notified and the gift of life can begin.

In order to maintain the health of the organs/tissue to be transplanted, the donor patient must remain on mechanical support. These machines keep blood and oxygen moving through the body until the transplant. Without this blood flow, the organs/tissue will not survive.

The donor patient is brought to an operating room where the surgical team removes the organs/tissue. This area of the hospital is restricted and family members are not permitted. Family members will have the opportunity to say goodbye to their loved before they enter the operating area.

Once the organs/tissue have been removed and the body has been cared for, family may ask to see their loved one again. The mechanical support machines and many of the tubes and catheter lines will have been removed. The incisions made for the donation are closed and covered. This does not impact how the body will appear at a funeral or memorial service.

From the operating room, the donated organs/tissue are prepared and transported immediately to the recipient. There are rules and guidelines around privacy and learning about the recipient of the organs/tissues. Talk with the transplant team for details about this.

Definitions

These are terms commonly used and may have multiple meanings.

Transplant: To transfer one body part into another individual.

Organ: A part of your body that performs a specific function: like your brain, lungs, or skin

Tissue: A group of cells that work together in a similar way; groupings of tissues form organs in the body such as the brain and heart.

Donor: The person who donates their organs.

Recipient: The person who receives the donor organ/tissue.

Mechanical support: Medical and/or mechanical intervention necessary to keep organs useable for donation.

Brain or cardiac death: When a body is unable to work without the support of medical machines