

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 most procedures were performed on patients who were very sick and had no other option but to go ahead and receive that organ.

In non-critical cases, the entire hospital atmosphere must be evaluated. The situation is fluid, but most transplant centers in Michigan are resuming their pre-COVID-19 transplant schedules, now that the initial coronavirus surge has peaked.

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've added COVID-19 testing to our process; we did that in mid-March, as the tests became available in Michigan. We test all potential donors, whether they have symptoms or not, before we proceed with recovery. Organs and tissue from potential donors who test positive for COVID-19 are not medically eligible for donation.

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.

When will living donation start up again?

Hospital transplant centers are monitoring this. It's unlikely there will be a specific day when the switch gets flipped; it will probably be a gradual process. There is currently no definitive answer, but the situation is being evaluated on a daily basis at individual hospitals and transplant centers in Michigan and across the country. The answer depends on the circumstances and patient safety factors those facilities.