

5 facts living kidney donors need to know

By Dr. Ehab Saad

The wait list of people who need a kidney transplant has nearly 95,000 names on it. According to the National Kidney Foundation, every 10 minutes, a new person is added to that list. Now, consider that 18 people die each day while waiting for a kidney. There is a massive, nationwide shortage of kidneys for transplant because the demand far exceeds the number of available donors. Most people wait about five years for a kidney from a deceased donor. Living donation offers a quicker option. Living donation is possible because each person is born with two kidneys, but our bodies can function with just one.

You don't have to be biologically related to be a match

A living kidney donor can be a family member, friend or stranger to the recipient. If you give a kidney to a person you know, it is called a directed donation. Living kidney donations can also happen in paired exchanges. A donor gives a kidney to a recipient they do not know, but with whom they are a match, in exchange for a compatible kidney for their loved one. There are also altruistic donations, when the donor gives a kidney to a stranger. This generally initiates a chain of donations.

The donor's health is a priority

All potential living kidney donors have to pass an initial screening and submit a complete medical history. Once you are approved on paper as a potential candidate, you will undergo tests for two reasons. First, a set of tests will confirm that your body is healthy enough for donation and for a life with one kidney. Then, you will undergo tests to determine your compatibility with a potential recipient.



Saad

The transplant center will connect you with a living kidney donor transplant team that is made up of physicians, a pharmacist, a dietitian, a social worker, a financial liaison, a transplant psychologist, an independent donor advocate and a transplant coordinator.

Your transplant coordinator will be your guide throughout the process.

When you undergo the medical tests, your care team will make sure that your kidneys, heart, lungs, circulatory system and overall physical and mental health are strong and that it is safe for you to donate. You will need to undergo blood tests, a urine test, a chest X-ray, an electrocardiogram (EKG), a cancer screening, a CT scan, an MRI scan and a psychosocial evaluation.

The blood tests will determine your blood and tissue type to see how closely you match a potential recipient. The closer the match, the less chance of the recipient's body rejecting the kidney. The blood test, called cross matching, involves mixing samples of both the potential donor and the recipient's blood to determine how the recipient's antibodies react with a specific donor's antigens. You could find out if you are a match for a potential donor in a matter of days.

Living kidney donors have the same health and quality of life as non-donors

The overall risks associated with kidney donation surgery are low. Carefully screened kidney donors are not more likely to develop kidney disease in the future just because they have one remaining kidney. One of the largest studies on the topic, published in the *New England Journal of*

Medicine, found the life expectancy and risk of kidney failure of a thoroughly evaluated living kidney donor is like that of a non-donor.

The recipient's insurance will cover your medical bills

Your health insurance should not be affected by donating a kidney. The recipient's insurance will cover your medical evaluation, surgery, follow-up tests and medical appointments. If you have specific insurance or financial questions, your hospital's transplant coordinator may be able to answer them or can refer you to a financial liaison.

Many states give tax deductions or credits to living donors for unreimbursed expenses associated with donation, which could include travel to the hospital, lodging and any lost wages. In Wisconsin, living organ donors are eligible for a state tax deduction of up to \$10,000.

Job security for living organ donors is protected by law

The typical recovery period for a living kidney donor is four to six weeks. Effective July 1, 2016, the Wisconsin Bone Marrow and Organ Donation Leave Act allows employees up to six weeks of leave to undergo and recover from a bone marrow or organ donation procedure. Additionally, in August 2018, the U.S. Department of Labor released a legal opinion stating that living organ donation is eligible for protection by the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) as it qualifies as a "serious health condition."

(Ehab Saad, MD, is a transplant nephrologist with the Froedtert & the Medical College Wisconsin Kidney and Pancreas Transplant Program at Froedtert & MCW Froedtert Hospital.)