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Can I Donate My Organs if I've Had Cancer?

Many cancer survivors want to help other people by becoming organ donors. It's possible for many people who've had cancer to donate, but it varies by cancer type and medical condition.

There's always an urgent need for donated organs. According to the [United Network for Organ Sharing](#)¹ (UNOS), the organization that facilitates every organ transplant in the United States, nearly 125,000 people are waiting for organs. Some organ donations, such as a kidney, may be done when a person is still living. Others are possible only if a person wishing to donate passes away under certain circumstances.

Can a donated organ give someone cancer?

The risk of passing cancer on to the person who gets an organ is extremely small, but there have been some reports in the medical literature of this happening. This is partly because organ recipients are given drugs to suppress their immune systems to help prevent rejection of the transplant. This could make the immune system unable to identify and kill cancer cells that may have been transplanted with the organ.

According to a study by UNOS, under certain circumstances there may be an acceptable risk in using organs from donors who have had certain types of cancer. This is particularly true if there's a long cancer-free interval before the organ donation. At present, UNOS does not recommend accepting organs from people with "actively spreading cancer." This means that most people recently diagnosed with cancer cannot donate organs, but it's OK to accept organs from donors with primary brain tumors that have not spread beyond the brain stem. Organs transplanted from these donors have not been found to impact life expectancy when compared with people who received organs from donors without brain cancer. In a study of nearly 500 organ recipients, no

one got the disease from the donated tissue of a person who had brain cancer. A 2014 study from the UK that included 200 donors with cancer (most had brain cancer) found that the transplants didn't give cancer to the recipients. But very rarely, there's a report of an organ donor who was thought to be cancer-free who unexpectedly transmitted it to a recipient. This is one reason why acceptance of organs for donation is up to each organ procurement agency and the organ recipient.

What if I'm not sure if my medical condition allows me to donate organs?

Some people with cancer may not qualify to be living donors due to their medical conditions. (That is, they may not be able to donate a kidney or part of their liver.) But some may still have organs and body tissues that can be used after they die.

If you want to donate, it's OK to list yourself as a donor on your driver's license. Be sure that your family knows of your wishes, too, since they may be asked to give consent. If your cancer has been actively spreading, internal organs will not be taken. But if you die after being cancer-free for a long time, your organs may be used. Other tissues, such as skin, tendons, and bone can often be used, too. Careful evaluation of any donor who has ever had cancer, including biopsies of anything unexpected, is done at the time of death. The decision about which organs or tissues can be safely used is then made by medical professionals, as long as your family agrees that you wanted to donate.

Even if other organs and tissues can't be used, donating your corneas is one way to offer help to others. Almost anyone with cancer (except those with certain blood or eye cancers) can donate their corneas. You can learn more about cornea donation from the [Eye Bank Association of America](#)² (see additional resources).

If you have questions about whether you may be able to donate your organs or tissues, please contact [UNOS](#)³ or [Donate Life America](#)⁴ (see additional resources) or the organ procurement center in your community.

Hyperlinks

1. unos.org/
2. <http://www.restoresight.org/>
3. <http://www.unos.org/>
4. <http://www.donatelife.net/>
5. <http://www.unos.org/>
6. <http://www.donatelife.net/>

7. <http://www.restoresight.org/>
8. <http://www.unos.org/>
9. <http://www.donatelife.net/>
10. <http://www.restoresight.org/>

Additional resources

United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS) Toll-free number: 1-888-894-6361 (1-888-TXINFO1) Website: www.unos.org (<http://www.unos.org/>)⁵

- Information on organ donation and transplant, myths about donation, and more about being a donor. Their patient website, www.transplantliving.org, gives reliable information to empower patients and families before, during, and after transplant.

Donate Life America Phone: 804-377-3580 Website: www.donatelife.net (<http://www.donatelife.net/>)⁶

- For information on organ, tissue, and cornea donations, as well as local state contact info

Eye Bank Association of America Phone: 202-775-4999
Website: www.restoresight.org (<http://www.restoresight.org/>)⁷

- Has information on cornea donation and transplant; also maintains a list of US and international eye banks

**Inclusion on this list does not imply endorsement by the American Cancer Society.*

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