

# Information about having a blood transfusion

This information sheet explains why you might need a blood transfusion and what to expect. Talk to your doctor about why you need (or may need) one and if there are other options in your case.

## Why might I need a blood transfusion?

You may need a blood transfusion if:

- > You lose large amounts of blood in surgery, childbirth or after a major accident.
- > Have anaemia (lack of red blood cells) that cannot be treated with iron or other vitamins alone.
- > Your body cannot make enough healthy new blood cells. This may be due to a bone marrow problem or the effects of chemotherapy.

## What are the different types of blood transfusions?

Blood donations are split into different parts and stored in special bags or bottles. You can then be given just the part that your body needs. The three main parts include:

- > Red blood cells, which carry oxygen to tissues and organs.
- > Platelets, which help stop bleeding.
- > Plasma, which contains blood clotting factors (to help stop bleeding) and other proteins and antibodies.

## What are the risks of blood transfusion?

Australia has one of the safest blood supplies in the world but as with all medical procedures, a blood transfusion is not free from risk.

The most common risks of transfusion include:

- > Minor reactions, such as a mild temperature or skin rash.
- > Fluid overload, causing breathing difficulties, especially in older people and those with heart problems.

Risks of transfusion which are very low include:

- > Receiving blood that is not 'matched' to you.
- > Severe reactions, for example, allergy or acute lung injury.
- > Transmission of infection, for example, bacteria or viruses.

Staff are trained to watch closely for reactions and to respond quickly.

## How is a blood transfusion given?

Blood is dripped into a vein, usually in your arm or hand, using a soft plastic tube.

Each pack of blood (a unit) can take up to 4 hours, but can be given more quickly if needed.

Clinical staff will do strict checks of your identity when a blood sample is taken and again just before your transfusion. It is important you wear your ID band and state your full name and date of birth when asked. This is to prevent you being given the wrong blood (meant for someone else). Speak up if there is any problem when staff check your identity. Make sure that your details (including spelling) are 100% correct.



## How will I feel during the blood transfusion?

Most people feel no different during their transfusion. Some develop a slight fever, chills or a rash. These are usually due to a mild reaction or allergy. These can be treated with medication (to reduce fever), or by giving the blood more slowly.

Staff will carefully monitor you for any problems during the transfusion. This means checking your pulse, blood pressure and temperature at regular times. If you feel at all unwell during the transfusion, it is important that you let the nurse know straight away.

## Can I refuse a transfusion?

Treatment is your choice. You have the right to refuse, but need to fully understand the consequences of this before doing so. If you have any reason for not accepting a blood transfusion, please let your doctor know now.

## What to ask your doctor

- Why do I need a blood transfusion?
- What are the benefits and risks in my case?
- Are there other options?
- Anything you don't understand, are concerned about, or want explained.

If you are having planned surgery:

- Is there anything I can do to reduce my need for blood transfusion?
- Am I starting out anaemic or low in iron and how can this be corrected?
- Is it possible to collect and return my blood that is lost during this operation?

## What to tell your doctor

You need to tell your doctor if you:

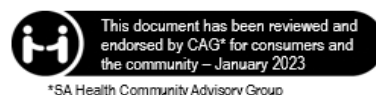
- Have any reason for not accepting a blood transfusion.
- Have had a reaction or problem with a blood transfusion in the past.
- Know that you have any special transfusion requirements or needs.
- Are on any blood thinning medication (such as aspirin, warfarin, clopidogrel, apixaban, dabigatran, rivaroxaban), which can increase the amount of bleeding. If you are having surgery, ask your doctor whether these should stop before the operation and when. Please remember, for your safety, only your doctor can make this decision because the risks of stopping may be greater than the benefits.
- Are taking any other medications (including herbal) and those available over the counter (without prescription) as some of these can also thin the blood.

## What if I have other worries about blood transfusion?

If you have any concerns, no matter how small you think they may be, you should talk with your doctor, nurse or midwife.

### For more information:

If you have access to the Internet and want to find out more about transfusion, you might find the following website useful:  
[www.lifeblood.com.au/patients](http://www.lifeblood.com.au/patients)



Government  
of South Australia