

By deciding to donate your body or organs, you can make a valuable gift to humanity and offer hope to future generations. Many medical breakthroughs were a direct result of the education and research made possible by body donation, including new treatments for heart disease, cancer, diabetes and Alzheimer's disease. Using donated bodies for research can also alleviate suffering by reducing the number of laboratory tests conducted on live animals.

Organ donation is also vitally important. Over 100,000 Americans of all ages desperately need a transplant, and your organs and tissues could save or transform more than 75 lives. In addition, more than one in two Americans suffer from a neurological disorder or disease, and donated brain tissue is critical for discovering treatments and cures. Your brain can provide tissue for dozens—or even hundreds—of neurological studies.

All major religions support or even encourage donation and view it as a life-giving act of compassion and generosity.

Body donation

You can donate your body to a medical education or research facility to be a part of scientific, medical or forensic research. This is commonly called "whole-body donation", "donating your body to science" or "making an anatomical gift." Medical students can use your body to learn about anatomical structures and practice their surgical skills, and doctors can try out groundbreaking new procedures. Researchers can use it to develop innovative medical devices, treatments and other life-saving medical advances.

Most adults of any age are eligible. Disqualifying factors can include recent surgery, autopsy, infectious disease, and extreme obesity or emaciation. Also most medical institutions will refuse your body if organs and/or tissues have been extracted. Removal of corneas rarely presents a problem, but the more extensive surgery required for the donation of other organs and tissues usually makes the body unsuitable for medical study.

While there is no federal registry, several states have anatomical boards that coordinate the donation process (Colorado, Florida, Maryland, Nebraska, and Virginia). In all other states you will need to find a program yourself. The Institute of Human Anatomy, instituteofhumananatomy.com, lists body donation programs by state, which can be helpful. Choose a program in your immediate area, since your body needs to be received quickly after death, and register with them directly. Be sure to discuss this decision with your family ahead of time. Medical institutions cannot accept your body after death if your next of kin object. While many places stipulate that you must sign up ahead of time, some will allow your survivors to donate your body instead.

The process after death is simple. When your family or the hospital contacts the donation program, a coordinator will determine if your body meets all their criteria. If it does, it can be transported directly to the facility, and usually will be embalmed and stored until needed.

Donating your body is often free or involves a minimal charge to transfer your body. Some medical schools, however, will require the family to cover the full cost—be sure to ask. If death occurs while you are at a distant location, your family could pay to transport your body to the original institution, or they could save money by asking a closer medical school if they would accept it instead.

Without special arrangements in advance, your body will not be available for a traditional funeral, but your family could hold a memorial service if they wish. Most medical schools will cremate your body within two years and bury or scatter the ashes at a nearby site, or they could return them to your family, depending on your written wishes.

Organ donation

After your death, many of your organs and tissues can be removed and transplanted into a person who needs them. Kidneys, liver, lungs, heart, pancreas, and intestines can replace damaged organs. Tissues such as corneas, heart valves, skin, bones and tendons can restore eyesight, repair hearts, heal burns, prevent amputation, and rebuild joints.

Note: *This is considered a "deceased donation," and is very different from a living, healthy person donating an extra organ.*

People of all ages and medical conditions are potential donors, though anyone younger than 18 must have the consent of a parent or guardian. Unfortunately only 3 in 1,000 registered donors will meet the criteria for organ donation at the end of life. The donor must die in a hospital on a life support system (breathing and blood circulating machines), have healthy organs, and a recipient must be found quickly enough for transplantation.

You can sign up on your state's organ donation registry, listed at organdonor.gov. Then to ensure



that your wishes are carried out, include the donor designation on your state ID or driver's license. These steps will legally authorize your organ donation. If your next of kin object, however, the procurement organization will typically honor their wishes, so be sure your family accepts your decision. If you don't register in advance, your family can offer your organs and tissues after your death if you meet the donation criteria.

If you are declared brain-dead while on life support, the hospital will contact the organ procurement organization, which does a medical evaluation. If donation is possible, a national transplantation network tries to match your organs with appropriate recipients. If one is found, the organ is removed and sent to the recipient's hospital for immediate transplant. Your tissues must be removed soon after death in a hospital setting too, but unlike organs, most can be stored for extended periods until needed.

Your family pays only for medical expenses before death and for funeral arrangements. The procurement organization will pay for all costs related to the donation. Your body will be returned to your family in a suitable condition for either cremation or burial, and a traditional funeral if desired. Reconstruction and/or embalming may be necessary if an open-casket viewing is planned, however.

Brain donation

Unlike other donated organs, the brain is used only for research. By studying the tissues, researchers hope to discover more ways to prevent, diagnose, and treat such crippling neurological disorders as addiction, autism, epilepsy, schizophrenia, dementia, Parkinson's disease and many others. Any competent person over 18 years of age may volunteer to donate; a legal guardian must provide consent for anyone younger. Healthy brains as well as diseased or injured ones are essential for the research. Certain active infections, prolonged ventilation, recent stroke or family objections could prevent the brain from being accepted, however.

To donate, you could preregister through The Brain Donor Project at braindonorproject.org, either for yourself or on behalf of another person. This registry serves the National Institute of Health's NeuroBioBank, a national network of brain banks. Then fill out and return the consent forms you receive. Be sure to let your family know your wishes. While your survivors can provide consent for donation, it's still best to register in advance since the brain must be recovered very quickly after death.

When your family calls the brain bank after your death, the staff will assess the suitability of your brain for donation and coordinate the transportation of your body to a local funeral home or medical facility. A recovery specialist removes your brain and ships it to the brain bank, where it will be available for research. The brain bank will pay for all costs associated with brain removal and transportation.

Afterwards, your body will be released quickly to your family, in time for a traditional funeral, burial or cremation. Since the method of removing the brain is not disfiguring, an open-casket viewing is possible, although embalming may be required by the funeral home.

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Body, Organ, and Brain Donation

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