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Patient Information

All I need to know about a blood transfusion



If you are a prospective patient who may need a blood transfusion, this information leaflet is for you.

Blood in itself consists of various components such as red cells, platelets, plasma and white cells, that each perform a specific function:

- Red cells are useful for their iron-rich stores and oxygen-carrying capacity.
- Platelets are useful for cessation of bleeding.
- Plasma is useful for its clotting proteins.
- White cells help the body fight infection and other diseases.

Blood transfusions comprise of red cell, platelet and plasma products.

How will I know if I may need a blood transfusion?

Your doctor will explain if you may need a blood transfusion and the various blood products and quantities necessary to treat your medical condition.

Will I need to give consent for a blood transfusion?

Yes. Documented informed consent is required prior to a blood transfusion. Your doctor will discuss the benefits, risks and alternatives to help you decide.

If you are a Jehovah's Witness patient, your doctor will discuss which blood components you may be willing to receive.

What if I cannot give consent?

If you are unable to give consent under emergency circumstances, the consent will be waived. If you are a minor, your parent or legal guardian may give consent. If you have a mental illness and are unable to give consent at the time, a legal guardian or person previously mandated in writing by the patient may give consent. Where a court order is obtained to permit treatment, the court's decision will override consent.

What are the benefits of a blood transfusion?

A blood transfusion can help replace blood lost due to surgery or injury and limit the complications of severe blood loss. A transfusion can also provide replacement of healthy blood cells in various blood disorders.

What are the risks of a blood transfusion?

Blood services in South Africa test every donation for HIV-1, HIV-2, hepatitis B, hepatitis C and syphilis, and screen donors for other potential infectious risks. There however remains a residual risk of infection transmission from a blood transfusion. The services mitigate this risk by recruiting only voluntary, non-remunerated donors and promote the retention of people who donate regularly.

Mandatory processes are followed to ensure blood group compatible blood is issued for a patient, although errors can occur that can have life-threatening consequences. The services reduce this risk by meticulous cross-checks to ensure that mix-up of patient samples does not occur, and promote best practices for patient identification and verification at the bedside.

A patient may experience an unpredictable adverse reaction to a blood transfusion, such as an allergic response or fever, that can be managed by the medical staff in hospital.

How safe are blood products?

Blood services in South Africa use the latest technologies and research to ensure blood product safety.

The services adopt a multi-layered approach to blood safety through donor education, donor selection, voluntary non-remunerated donation, pre-donation screening, a donor confidential hotline, donation testing and education of healthcare workers.

What are the alternatives to a blood transfusion?

There are several alternatives that your doctor could discuss, including cell salvage procedures and the use of certain medications to reduce blood loss.

If you are to undergo a planned procedure and may have concerns about receiving blood from the general blood supply, you could get family and friends with compatible blood groups to donate for you, known as designated/directed donation. Feel free to discuss this option with your doctor.

How much does a blood transfusion cost?

WCBS does not charge for the blood itself but for expenses incurred to process the blood into a safe blood product that is suitable for transfusion. There are approximately 70 products and 40 services. The products given are dependent on your medical condition. The charges include the cost of the blood product itself, laboratory testing, product cancellation, after-hour service and blood transportation.

For more information, please visit our website.