

Variant CJD and blood donation

Keeping UK blood safe

The UK has an exceptionally good track record of safe blood. Like any medical procedure it does have a small risk associated with it but to make sure blood is as safe as possible we have extremely tight tests and controls. We constantly review our safety methods to ensure that they are appropriate to any new problems that may emerge, such as vCJD. And of course any risk associated with receiving blood is balanced with the risk of not receiving it at the time it's needed.

In all the years of giving blood to patients we have always tried to make the blood as safe as possible whilst meeting demand. The simple fact is that for years blood has saved millions of lives and will continue to do so.

Can blood donors catch vCJD from giving blood?

No. All blood donations are taken using sterile, non-reusable needles and equipment. Giving blood carries no risk of catching vCJD.

How will this affect the blood supply?

We estimate that many thousands of blood donors will have to stop giving for the time being. Over the coming months and years, this will add up to an enormous number of donations that will be desperately missed. Yet there are still just as many lives to save and just as many patients who need vital treatments only made possible by the blood donations that you give.

Giving blood is as urgent and as safe as ever. If you can still give blood, please make an extra effort to do something amazing.

If you or anyone you know would like more information about this they can find out more by calling our Donor Helpline on 0845 7 711 711. Our donor helpline is open for general enquiries 24 hours a day, every day of the year. If you have a non-urgent medical enquiry, please try to contact us between 9.00am and 5.00pm Monday to Friday.

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Information for Donors

If you have given blood and you become unwell (except for a cold) in the 2 weeks following your donation, ring our donor helpline as soon as possible.

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Do something amazing today

Save a life

Give blood



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A new rule for blood donors

From 5th April 2004 we can no longer accept blood donations from people who have received blood during the course of any medical treatment or procedure in the UK since 1st January 1980.

This new rule has been introduced as a purely precautionary measure. It aims to reduce the possible risk of variant CJD (vCJD) being passed on from donor to patient.

However, just like our other rules regarding who can and can't give – things can change. As new scientific information comes to light, we will review this situation. This could mean either continuing this ruling or asking people to come back. We just don't know yet.

About vCJD

Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) is one of a group of diseases that affect the central nervous system. CJD cases have naturally occurred in several forms for many years. Fortunately, CJD in all its forms is very rare indeed.

The more recently occurring variant CJD (vCJD) is believed to be the consequence of eating contaminated beef, related to BSE (or mad cow disease) in UK cattle herds after 1980.

CJD is not like a cold, you can't catch it from people in the same room. There is no evidence of transmission by sex or from mother to baby at birth. However, person to person transmission can occur during medical procedures. There have been a small number of confirmed transmissions so far via

instruments, tissue grafts and the use of human derived growth hormones. As receiving blood is a medical procedure, it follows that vCJD may infect a patient via blood. There is no definite proof, but it remains a possibility.

What we are doing about vCJD

Since 1997 the Blood Services of the UK have taken a number of precautionary measures, just in case:

1. The recall of any blood components from donors who later go on to develop vCJD
2. The importation of plasma from countries with few or no cases of BSE to manufacture blood products
3. The removal of white cells from the blood before it is transfused (white cells may carry vCJD infection)
4. The importation of plasma from countries with few or no cases of BSE for children born after January 1996.

It wasn't until December 2003 that evidence came to light that a blood donor may have transmitted vCJD to a patient via a blood transfusion. Scientists are not 100% sure that this is the case as it is still possible that both donor and patient separately acquired vCJD by eating contaminated beef.

Even so, in light of this case we are now asking donors who have received blood in the UK since 1st January 1980 (the date BSE became present in the UK food chain) to stop giving blood. By doing this we will be excluding a group of people who have, potentially, a slightly higher chance of having been exposed to vCJD than those who have not received blood.

We are still allowing people that are not sure if they have received blood, to donate.

Donors who are not sure or don't know that they've received blood can continue to give. We are just asking that they tell our staff that they are 'not sure' so that our records can be amended.

We have decided not to exclude people who are not sure because our research shows that if we did we could seriously reduce blood stocks and the last thing we want to do is run out of blood. To lose these people's donations is simply not justified by the even smaller risk associated with people who are not sure that they have received blood.

I know someone that has received blood. What does it mean to their health?

People who have received blood since 1980 belong to a large group that together has a potentially slightly higher risk of exposure to vCJD than the general population.

Just how small this risk is can be seen from the fact that in the last ten years, UK hospitals have used 23 million units of blood, and yet the December 2003 case is the first ever recorded. And we are still not 100% sure that this was an actual transmission. And yet as small as the risk is, by excluding these donors we can make the blood that patients receive that little bit safer. We are erring heavily on the side of caution.

Since 1997, a medical study has identified just a handful of patients who have received blood from donors who were well at the time they gave blood but some time later went on to develop vCJD. All of those patients have been informed, and to date only one of them has possibly been infected by vCJD from the blood they received.