

## The circle of giving

By [Jen Christensen](#)

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### **Organ Transplantation**

In organ transplantation, a diseased organ is replaced with one from a donor. According to the United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS), 28,352 organ transplants were performed last year. The most commonly transplanted organs were kidneys (16,623), followed by livers (6,492) and hearts (2,210).

When a transplant is needed, the patient is referred to a specialized transplant center. Doctors evaluate his/her physical and mental health and availability of a social support system. If the patient is a viable candidate, their name is added to the transplant waiting list.

When an organ donor is identified, a transplant coordinator accesses the transplant waiting list. The donor organs are matched up with candidates on the waiting list. Potential recipients are ranked for suitability based on tissue match, blood type, length of time on the waiting list, immune status and distance from the donor organ. For some organs, medical urgency is also considered. The donor organ typically goes to the person at the top of the rank. If the intended recipient is not healthy enough for a transplant or unable to undergo immediate surgery, the organ will be offered to the next person on the list.

### **The Need for More Donors**

Charles Van Buren, M.D., a Transplant Surgeon with the University of Texas Medical School in Houston, says a single donor offering organs and tissue for transplant could potentially save or improve the lives of up to 50 people. But there still aren't enough donor organs available for all the people who need them. At the end of March 2008, there were more than 98,000 candidates waiting for a transplant. Currently, the average wait for a new heart is 230 days. For a lung, the wait is about 1,068 days; for a liver, 796 days; and for a kidney, 1,121 days.

The organization, Donate Life America, reports one name is added to the transplant waiting list every 12 minutes. About 18 people die each day because a suitable donor organ is never found.

### **Giving the Gift of Life**

April is National Donate Life Month. According to Donate Life America, 90 percent of Americans support organ donation. Yet only about 30 percent know how to become a donor. Health experts say there are only a few steps to volunteering. First, inform family, friends and your health care provider of your wishes to become an organ donor. Next, fill out a donor card and designate your intentions on your driver's license. Carry a copy of the donor card with you at all times. You may also want to keep a copy of the donor card in your car's glove compartment and give one to your physician for your medical file.

Even with a donor card, sometimes family members are reluctant to agree to the donation. Assign a health care proxy or medical power of attorney who can make medical decisions for you should you be unable to do so. Your decision to become an organ donor can also be stated in a living will or advance care directive. Donation isn't limited to organs. Tissue (like skin or corneas) can also be donated.

### **Giving Back**

One family has a story that highlights the importance and selflessness of organ donation. Garrett Davis was born with a liver condition that eventually led to cirrhosis. By 25, he became critically ill. At the peak of his illness he was unable to get out of bed and needed a new liver.

After a two-and-a-half year wait, a suitable liver was finally located and a transplant was performed. Garrett slowly recovered. He felt well enough to go back to his job in landscaping and participate in recreational activities.

Garrett and his family were very grateful to have a renewed opportunity for life. It was his wish to give back to those who cared enough to give him a second chance by becoming an organ donor himself. One year after his transplant, Garrett died from a brain aneurysm. His family donated his heart and kidneys, bringing the organ donation process to a full circle and passing on hope to other patients and families.

### **AUDIENCE INQUIRY**

For general information on organ donation and transplantation, or to become a donor:  
American Society of Transplantation, <http://www.a-s-t.org>  
Donate Life America, <http://www.donatelife.net>  
United Network for Organ Sharing, <http://www.unos.org>, or <http://www.transplantliving.org>  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <http://www.organdonor.gov>

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### **Attention Illinois Organ Donors**

Thanks so much for calling attention to this crucial issue Jen. Just a reminder for Illinois residents that you need to RE-REGISTER after Jan. 1, 2006 to join the state's new registry and ensure your wishes to be a donor are honored. Signing the back of your driver's license is no longer adequate to ensure these wishes.

You can quickly register at [www.DonateLifeIllinois.org](http://www.DonateLifeIllinois.org). Help the more than 4,700 Illinois residents and 98,000 people nationwide that are awaiting a second chance at life.

\*If you're a non-Illinois resident, you can visit [www.ShareYourLife.org](http://www.ShareYourLife.org) to find out how to register in your state.

— Scott Meis, Chicago