

Judaism and Organ Donation

A guide to organ donation
and Jewish beliefs





General information

Organ donation

Organ donation is the gift of an organ to help someone else who needs a transplant. Hundreds of people's lives are saved every year by organ transplants. Tissue such as skin, bone, heart valves and corneas can also be used to help others.

When can organ donation take place?

Doctors and nurses are committed to doing everything possible to save life. Organs are only removed for transplantation once all attempts to save life have failed and after death has been certified by a doctor or doctors who are entirely independent of the transplant team. Most donated organs come from people who die from a severe brain injury and who receive treatment on a ventilator in an intensive care unit.

The brain injury damages vital centres in the brain stem which are essential to maintain life. It is not the same as a 'coma' or 'persistent vegetative state'. No one can live once these centres have been destroyed. Tests are carried out to strict guidelines and show conclusively when this has happened.

In addition, Jewish patients will require agreement from their Rabbinic authority that death as defined by Jewish law has definitely occurred.

Consent

The consent, or lack of objection, of those closest to the patient is always sought before organs can be donated. The decision about donation is theirs and they can consult with their religious advisors and counsellors if they wish.

Donation is an individual choice and views differ even within the same religious groups. This is why it is so important for people to discuss their wishes with their loved ones and religious authorities. Many families who agree to organ donation have said that it helps to know some good has come from their loss.

Care and respect

The removal of organs is **always** carried out with the greatest care and respect. The body can be seen afterwards if the family wishes.

Judaism and organ donation

In principle Judaism sanctions and encourages organ donation in order to save lives (*pikuach nefesh*).

This principle can sometimes override the strong objections to any unnecessary interference with the body after death, and the requirement for immediate burial of the complete body.

It is understandable that there will be worries about organ donation. At a time of stress and grief, linked to sudden unexpected illness and death, reaching a decision about donation can be difficult for a family. It is at this time that *halachic* guidance is so important.

Judaism insists that no organ may be removed from a donor until death – as defined in Jewish law – has definitely occurred. This can cause problems concerning heart, lung and similar transplants where time is of the essence.

Judaism insists that honour and respect are due to the dead (*kavod hamet*). After donation, the avoidance of unnecessary further interference with the body, and the need for immediate interment, are again of prime concern.

As all cases are different, Jewish law requires consultation with a competent Rabbinic authority **before** consent is granted.

(These guidelines have been prepared in consultation with the Office of the Chief Rabbi)



*“One who saves a single life -
it is as if he has saved an entire world”*
(Pirke D’Rav Eliezer, Chapter 48).

כל המוקיים נפש אחת כאלו קיים עולם מלא

Organ donation the gift of life

Today more than 10,000 people in the UK need an organ transplant which could save or dramatically improve their lives. Most are waiting for a kidney, others for a heart, lung or liver transplant.

Please join the NHS Organ Donor Register and tell family and friends about your wishes.

Join the NHS Organ Donor Register Online at:

www.organdonation.nhs.uk
by phoning 0300 123 23 23
or text SAVE to 84118

Transplants save lives

Information on Judaism is available from:
www.bbc.co.uk/religion

