

Organ and Tissue Donation Following Brain Death

What does brain death mean?

Brain death occurs in patients who have suffered a severe injury to the brain. As a result of the injury, the brain swells and obstructs its own blood supply causing brain tissue to die and permanent loss of brain function. Brain death is permanent and irreversible. It is a legal definition of death. However, the vital organs such as the heart, lungs, liver, pancreas and kidneys can be kept viable for a few days if supported by artificial or mechanical support.

What causes brain death?

Death of the brain can occur from illness or accidental injuries. High blood pressure can cause bleeding into the brain and result in death. A heart attack will stop oxygen flow to the brain, which may cause the brain to die. A brain infection, brain tumor or a traumatic injury may cause the brain to swell and lead to death.

How does a physician determine brain death?

A physician conducts medical tests to make the diagnosis of brain death. Tests include a clinical examination to show that your loved one has no brain reflexes and cannot breathe on their own. Other testing may include a blood flow test (cerebral angiogram) or an EEG (electroencephalogram). These tests may be done to confirm the absence of blood flow or brain activity.

Your loved one may exhibit spinal activity or reflexes, such as twitching or muscle contractions. Spinal reflexes are caused by electrical impulses that remain in the spinal column. These reflexes are possible even after brain death.

I have always understood that when a person dies, the heart stops beating. If my loved one is brain dead, why does their heart continue to beat?

The heart has the ability to beat independently of the brain as long as it has oxygen. The heart eventually will stop. All body systems gradually stop working soon after brain death. This process cannot be reversed.

Is it possible that our loved one is just in a coma?

A patient in a coma is medically and legally alive. They may breathe when the ventilator is removed, or have brain activity. People who are brain dead are not in a coma.

Does our loved one feel any pain or suffer after brain death is declared?

When a patient is declared brain dead, they are deceased. When someone is deceased, they cannot feel pain or suffer.

Is there anything else that can be done?

Everything that can be done to save your loved one's life is done before brain death is declared. After the diagnosis of brain death is made, there is no chance of recovery.

Are there any proven cases where patients were declared brain dead and later restored to normal life?

Brain death is irreversible. When you hear about someone who was brain dead and recovered, they were in a deep coma with slight brain activity. In brain death, there is no brain activity.

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Can anyone be an organ donor?

Because organ donation occurs in a hospital, and only with patients who are declared either brain or cardiac deceased, organ donation is a rare opportunity that is given to approximately four percent of the population. This extraordinary gift offers a lasting legacy and a way families can honor their loved one. Tissue donation is an option available to many deceased patients.

How do I know if my loved one is a donor?

If your loved one was a registered organ, tissue and eye donor, a UW OTD or hospital staff member will share that information with you. If your loved one was not a registered donor, the person's legal next of kin must then give consent for donation.

When does a person become a donor?

The process of donation takes place only after a physician declares a person brain dead, using strict neurological criteria.

Why and for how long must the ventilator be kept on after a person is declared brain dead?

The ventilator is needed to provide oxygen to the vital organs and will be kept on until surgery can be arranged and performed. Without oxygen, the organs would cease to function and would not be viable for transplant.

How long will the surgery take?

The length of time depends on what organs are recovered. The average length of time is four to six hours.

Does the donor's family have to pay the costs associated with organ and tissue donation?

No. All costs related to donation will be paid for by UW OTD. The donor's family neither pays for nor receives payment for donation. However, hospital costs incurred before the donation, and any funeral arrangements, remain the responsibility of the family or person handling the estate.

Is an open casket funeral possible after organs and/or tissues are donated?

The donation of organs and/or tissues will not disfigure the body, and should not interfere with an open casket funeral. The transplant operation is done under sterile, surgical conditions in a hospital operating room. Speak to your funeral director for more specific information regarding clothing selection following tissue donation.