

The Gift that Keeps on Giving: Organ, Tissue, and Body Donation

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Giving yourself to others after you die – literally, a part or your entire body – is the ultimate gift that you can give. Organ, tissue, and body donations save lives, improve medical education, and support research in numerous disciplines such as road safety, body identification, and the development of medical devices.

Body part donation

Body part donation is the donation of organs or tissues for transplant to persons who need those body parts to survive or improve their quality of life. Many organs and tissues can be transplanted including the heart, lungs, kidneys, pancreas, liver, corneas, skin, bone, and heart valves.

In the United States, a national system matches potential donors with recipients following strict standards to ensure the fair and ethical distribution of donated organs and tissues. Blood and tissue type, body size, severity of illness in the recipient, and donor location (i.e., distance to the recipient) are considered in matching donor organs and recipients.

Age and health status do not preclude a donation. In most situations, however, the donor must be in the hospital at the time of death, on mechanical ventilation with blood pressure maintenance, to optimize the condition of the organs or tissues. In June of 2024, the liver of a 98-year-old World War II veteran and long-time educator was successfully transplanted into a 72-year-old woman.

Organizations that obtain and transport donated body parts for transplant (sometimes called recovery agencies) are not-for-profit agencies mandated by federal law and regulated by the Association of Organ Procurement Organizations. The recovery agency, working with hospital staff, determines the acceptability of an organ or tissue donation at the time of the donor's death.

The recovery agency covers all costs related to the donation, including keeping the donor on life support and procuring the organs or tissues. The donor's family is responsible for disposition of the donor's body as well as other medical care received by the donor prior to death.

For more information about organ and tissue donation for transplant, contact LifeCenter Northwest at <https://lcnw.org/>.

Full body donation

Full body donation is the donation of a body for the purposes of education, training, or research.

Unlike the donation of organs and tissues for transplant, full body donation is not coordinated at the national level. Potential donors (or their families) must arrange for donations with individual agencies or institutions that recover organs not intended for transplant. These agencies include schools of medicine, dentistry, and mortuary science and for-profit businesses that distribute bodies or body parts to other concerns. The American Association of Tissue Banks (AATB)

offers standards and an accreditation program for these organizations, but membership is voluntary.

The recovery agency determines the acceptability of a body donation at the time of the donor's death. Certain infectious diseases, severe trauma, legal issues, and other factors can prevent a recovery agency from accepting a donation.

Bodies accepted for donation are transported as soon as possible and will not be available for funerals or memorial services. Donated bodies are usually cremated after their intended use; the remains can be returned to the next-of-kin, if requested.

The recovery agency usually covers legal fees, paperwork, and the ultimate disposition of the body. The donor's family may be responsible for storage and body transport, depending on recovery agency policies.

For more information on full body donation for the purposes of education, training, or research, contact the recovery agencies that serve our area. (See sidebar.)

Steps to donation

If organ, tissue, or body donation interests you, take the following steps.

Register with the appropriate recovery agency. To donate body parts for transplant, register when you apply for or renew your driver's license, instruction permit, or ID card. You can also register online at <https://lcnw.org/>

To donate your body for education, training, or research, complete pre-authorization paperwork as required by the body recovery agency you select.

Document your decision to donate your body or body parts. A disposition of body form (also called a letter of intent) is a good place to record your wishes. You can also include this information in your health care directive (also known as a living will or advance directive). Be sure to sign and date all forms.

Because acceptance of a body is not assured, if you wish to donate your full body, create a backup plan for body disposition and include that information in your end-of-life documents.

Finally, talk with your family about your desire to donate. Family members cannot override your intentions if recorded in legal documents, but they can slow the process so that donation is not possible. Furthermore, for full body donation, family members might be responsible for contacting the recovery agency at the time of your death. Make sure that all family members are aware of your end-of-life wishes and how to proceed.

Jeanette Stehr-Green volunteers at Volunteer Hospice of Clallam County along with a host of other community members who provide respite care, grief and bereavement support, and access to free medical equipment.

SIDE BAR

Full Body Recovery Agencies that Serve Western Washington

These agencies will accept full bodies for education, training, or research purposes, not transplantation, from locations in Washington state.

BioGift Anatomical and Surgical Education Center
(425) 224-5661
<https://www.biogift.org/>

Lake Washington Institute of Technology - Funeral Service Education
(425) 739-8306
<https://www.lwtech.edu/academics/school-of-health-sciences/funeral-service/>

MedCure
(866) 560-2525
<https://medcure.org/donor/>

Science Care
(800) 417-3747
<https://www.sciencecare.com/body-donation-overview>

Texas State University Forensic Anthropology Center*
(512) 245-1900
www.txstate.edu/anthropology/facts/donations

University of Tennessee Forensic Anthropology Center*
(865) 974-4408
<https://fac.utk.edu/body-donation/>

University of Washington Willed Body Program
(206) 543-1860
<https://www.uwmedicine.org/school-of-medicine/about/willed-body-program>

Washington State University Willed Body Program*
(509) 368-6600
<https://medicine.wsu.edu/give/willed-body-program/>

*These programs do not cover the cost of body transportation from Clallam County and may require family members to work with a local funeral home that charges a fee for services.