

Organ donation and religious beliefs

A guide to organ donation and Jewish beliefs

Inside front

Organ donation

Organ donation is the gift of an organ to help someone who needs a transplant. Thousands of people's lives across the UK are saved or improved each year by organ transplants. But every day across the UK someone dies waiting for an organ transplant.

Organs that can be donated by people who have died include the heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, pancreas and small bowel. Tissue such as skin, bone, heart valves and corneas can also be used to help others. Living donation of a single kidney or part of the liver is also possible.

Judaism and organ donation

In principle Judaism sanctions and encourages organ donation in order to save lives - that is for the purpose of *"pikuach nefesh"*. This principle can override Jewish objections to deceased organ donation, such as the requirements (i) to avoid unnecessary interference with the body after death; (ii) not to derive benefit from the dead body; and to ensure that burial takes place as soon as possible.

It is understandable a Jewish family may have worries or concerns when they are approached to consider deceased organ donation for a loved one. At a time of stress and grief, linked to sudden and unexpected illness and death, this may be difficult for them. They may be worried that giving their support for organ donation going ahead will conflict with the honour and respect that is due to the dead – known as *"kavod hamet"*.

Judaism considers each case as different. It is important to recognise that there can be an individual past history which may influence family decisions. Some people will have discussed the question with their families in advance and some may have registered their donation decision on the NHS Organ Donation Register that they want the NHS to speak to family and anybody else appropriate about how organ donation can go ahead in line with their faith or beliefs. Other people may have used the form available on the NHS Organ Donor Register to nominate someone to make the organ donation decision.

When will organ donation be discussed with families?

Most deceased donor organ donation comes from people who die after severe brain injury. They will be on a ventilator in an Intensive Care Unit. The priority for the doctors and healthcare staff caring for them is to do everything they can to save the patient's life. Organ donation will only be discussed with families if the doctors and healthcare staff believe that all attempts to save life have failed. The doctors involved with care in these units are entirely independent of the doctors who are involved in the transplantation process. The lead person for the discussion is the Specialist Nurse for Organ Donation (SNOD), and these nurses work according to a Code of Practice set out by the Human Tissue Authority.

The one way that death is determined in Intensive Care is when the brain injury is so severe that it has damaged the vital centres in the brain that are essential for life. Doctors call this “brain stem death” because it is in that part of the brain that the important centres are located. The neurological criteria for this diagnosis are clearly outlined in a National Code of Practice. The necessary tests are carried out by two independent doctors on two separate occasions. If the test gives any indication that the person is in a coma, then death has not occurred.

The other way that families may be asked about organ donation is when the patient has not yet died, but both the clinical team and the family agree that there is no hope of any meaningful recovery and intensive care treatment should be withdrawn. If the person is not conscious in any way and shows no signs of breathing when intensive care treatment (such as with a ventilator) is stopped, then “circulatory (cardiovascular) death” is confirmed. and donation may go ahead if the family support this for their loved one. Again there is national guidance about how these decisions should be taken.

What ways can families be helped to decide about deceased organ donation?

Specialist Nurses for Organ Donation sensitively approach the families of people whose organs could be used to help others after death. It is often easier for families when the patient’s views have been recorded on the NHS Organ Donor Register or were shared verbally with family members. When the specialist nurse speaks to the family, they can either agree to donation going ahead or say no. Many families will want to ask further questions, and Jewish families may have concerns in particular about “*kavod hamet*”.

To help them with their difficult decision, it is possible for people to stipulate in advance that their family and / or their nominated representative on the NHS Organ Donor Register should consult with a Rabbi, or a specific religious authority. The aim of this discussion is to help the family to decide whether or not to agree to organ donation within the context of their faith and culture as well as in the context of healthcare.

In Judaism it is widely recognised that families are entitled to think through this decision, and to make it after they have had such advice. Expertise in Jewish law, alongside accurate information about what has happened to the potential donor, should help to resolve some of the questions that families may have. Judaism holds that organ donation may not be initiated until death has definitely occurred. For some Jews “brain stem death” is acceptable; for others donation can only take place after “circulatory death”.

Some families may have difficulty in identifying the respected religious adviser from whom they should make enquiries. Mostly this will be evident from their community affiliation. If there is uncertainty then the main religious organisations that provide supportive information are the United Synagogue, the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations, the Federation of Synagogues, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogues, the Masorti Synagogues, Reform Judaism and the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues.

Care and respect

Once a decision is made in favour of deceased organ donation, the removal of organs is carried out with care and respect for the body. Until the body is taken to an operating theatre for this removal the family can remain with it, and if they so wish then a chaplain, a local Rabbi or lay leader, or their religious adviser can be with them.

After donation has taken place it is important that “*kavod hamet*” applies. In Judaism any further interference with the body must be avoided. There should be immediate transfer of

the body to the burial society so that rapid burial can take place – this is a prime concern for the family.

Key points

- Judaism approaches the question of deceased organ donation on an individual case-by-case basis.
 - The family of the deceased play a key role in the process.
 - They often require support not only about understanding the medical issues but also about how organ donation can be done in a way that is consistent with their faith and cultural traditions.
 - At a time of stress and grief consultation with Rabbis and religious authorities can provide support and assistance.
 - The Jewish principles of *pikuach nefesh* and *kavod hamet* need to be respected.
 - During and after the donation process Judaism incorporates another principle which must not be neglected – that of “*nichum aveilim*” – giving comfort to the bereaved.
-

How do I become a donor?

If you want to donate some or all of your organs or tissue after your death, the best way to ensure your family know what you want and honour your decision is to register as a donor on the NHS Organ Donor Register and to tell your family what you have decided.

What if I want to nominate someone to make the donation decision?

There is a form on the NHS Organ Donor Register, which enables you to nominate someone else to make the donation decision. You will need to complete the form and post it back.

What if I don't want to donate?

If you don't want to donate, it is important to register the decision on the NHS Organ Donor Register and to tell your family.

You can register your decision, whatever it is, online at organdonation.nhs.uk or by calling 0300 123 23 23.

To find out more about organ and tissue donation, visit organdonation.nhs.uk