

Q and A: Transplants and people of color

April 22 2022, by Heather Carlson Kehren



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DEAR MAYO CLINIC: My wife is African American, and we just learned that she is going to need a kidney transplant. I heard that most of the people on the waitlist are people of color, and I'm wondering whether people from diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds end up having to wait longer for a transplant?

ANSWER: It is true that most people on the waitlist for a lifesaving organ are people of color. Of the more than 106,000 on the waitlist in the U.S., roughly 60% are minorities. More than 30,000 Black patients are waiting for a transplant, followed by more than 22,000 Hispanic and Latino patients.

I often am asked why people of color make up such a large share of people on the waitlist. One of the reasons has to do with the conditions that prompted the need for a transplant in the first place. For instance, there are higher rates of heart disease, [high blood pressure](#) and diabetes in these communities. Those chronic diseases can eventually lead to organ failure.

African Americans are nearly four times more likely to have kidney failure compared to [white people](#), according to the National Kidney Foundation. Latinos, Asian Americans and Native Americans also have an increased risk of [kidney failure](#).

Wait time for a transplant can vary depending on the area of the country and the organ needed. And while it is true that people of color may end up having to wait longer for a transplant, it is important to understand that the number of people in need of a transplant far exceeds the number of willing donors. That is true for people of all backgrounds.

Every day, an estimated 17 people in the U.S. die while awaiting an organ transplant.

Organs are not matched based on race and ethnicity. However, people will generally have a better chance of matching with someone from a similar racial or ethnic background. The reason is that compatible blood types and tissue markers used for making a match are more likely to be found among members of the same ethnic group, according to LifeSource, an organization that assists in the organ donation process.

That is why it is so important to have a diverse pool of donors.

But only about 30% of [organ donors](#) come from communities of color. Increasing the diversity of organ donors will improve access to transplants for people of color.

Signing up to be an organ [donor](#) is a simple way to ensure people who need a lifesaving transplant can get one. To sign up to be a donor, go to the Donate Life America website.

As someone needing a [kidney transplant](#), your wife may have another option that would not likely require as long a wait time: receiving a kidney from a living donor.

Living-kidney donation is the most common type of living-donor [transplant](#). Donors give one of their two healthy kidneys to the recipient. People only need one kidney to live a healthy, active life.

People also can donate a portion of their liver to someone in need. The donor's liver regenerates within a matter of weeks. People can consider donating a kidney or liver to a relative, friend, acquaintance or a stranger.

All potential donors undergo a medical evaluation to make sure that they are suitable for donation. Living donors must be 18 or older and be in good physical and mental health.

Sometimes, a potential kidney donor who wants to give to a family member or friend isn't the best match for that recipient. In those situations, paired donation is considered. Donors and recipients are matched with other donors and recipients, creating a so-called "kidney chain." Ultimately, we need more people from all backgrounds to sign up to be donors.

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