

A 98-year-old man's liver was donated. He is believed to be the oldest American organ donor ever

June 12 2024, by Jim Salter



This photo provided by Linda Mitchell shows Orville Allen of Poplar Bluff, Mo., hugging his great-grandson in March 2024. Allen died Wednesday, May 29, 2024, and his liver was successfully donated and transplanted to a 72-year-old woman. Transplant organizations say Allen is the oldest American ever to donate an organ upon death. Credit: Linda Mitchell via AP

Orville Allen lived a lifetime of service, and when he died at age 98 he had one last thing to give: his liver.

Allen, a veteran of both World War II and the Korean War and a longtime educator in rural southeastern Missouri, is the oldest American to ever donate an organ, transplant organizations said. He died on May 29 and his liver was successfully transplanted to a 72-year-old woman, according to [Mid-America Transplant](#).

Allen was in robust health until he suffered a fall while picking up storm debris at his home in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, on May 27, his daughter, Linda Mitchell said. He struck the back of his head and was flown to St. Francis Medical Center in Cape Girardeau.

Swelling around Allen's brain couldn't be healed. As the family was preparing to say goodbye, [hospital staff](#) had a question: Would they consider donating his liver?

Given Allen's age, it was a question that caught the relatives by surprise. But surgeons had examined him and determined the organ was acceptable for transplant.

Knowing their dad's nature—always the first to check in on people, always at the doorstep of a needy neighbor—the siblings didn't hesitate.

"It turned it from being such a sad loss of our dad to having this little ray of joy because he was doing what he'd done all his life," Mitchell said. "He was giving one more gift."

Previously, Cecil Lockhart of West Virginia was the oldest person to donate an organ upon death, according to the [Center for Organ Recovery & Education](#), which coordinated recovery of his liver. He was 95 when he died in 2021, and his liver was successfully transplanted to a woman.

More people than ever are getting new organs, according to data from the [United Network for Organ Sharing](#), or UNOS, a nonprofit organization that has run the transplant system under a government contract for nearly four decades. Last year was a record year for donations from the deceased—more than 16,000—and for the number of organ transplants performed—more than 46,000—according to UNOS. Liver transplants topped 10,000 for the first time ever.

Still, more than 100,000 people are on the nation's list for a new organ and many will die waiting. The need is so great that scientists are working on alternatives to ease the ongoing shortages. Earlier this year in Massachusetts, Richard "Rick" Slayman became the [first recipient](#) of a genetically modified pig kidney. He [died two months after the transplant](#)

Increasingly, [older adults](#) can donate organs upon their death, said Kevin Lee, president and CEO of Mid-America Transplant.



This undated photo provided by Linda Mitchell shows Orville Allen of Poplar Bluff, Mo., holding his great-granddaughter at her baptism. Allen died Wednesday, May 29, 2024, and his liver was successfully donated and transplanted to a 72-year-old woman. Transplant organizations say Allen is the oldest American ever to donate an organ upon death. Credit: Linda Mitchell via AP

"As we've seen advances in medical science, we have been educating over the past five years nurses and hospital staff not to think about age when they call in those referrals, but really allow our medical team and transplant physicians to evaluate the medical eligibility of each individual," Lee said.

Two years ago, a liver was procured from a 90-year-old donor in Mid-

America's region, which includes eastern Missouri, southern Illinois and northeastern Arkansas, Lee said. Last fall, livers were donated by an 88-year-old and an 84-year-old.

The liver "is resilient. We see liver donations at all ages," Lee said.

About 12% of deceased organ donors in the first four months of this year were people age 65 or older, UNOS spokeswoman Anne Paschke said.

"Organ donation at advanced ages can be successful and provide life-saving benefits for the recipients," Dr. David Klassen, chief medical officer for UNOS, said in a statement. But the impact of aging varies by organ, he said. In fact, many transplant centers won't consider hearts from senior donors.

Allen was a lifelong resident of southeast Missouri. He was a pilot in the Army Air Corps in World War II, then served in artillery communications in the Army 1st Cavalry Division in the Korean War. After the wars, he spent 27 years in the Army Reserve, retiring as a lieutenant colonel.

He also farmed and taught vocational agriculture at Neelyville High School, near Poplar Bluff, for nearly four decades. He and his wife of 70 years, Geraldine, who died in 2019, had three children, three grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

He never got around to signing up to be an organ donor, but the family said they hope his story spurs more people to register.

In fact, they said, it already has.

"A whole bunch of people at the visitation and funeral who were former

students and friends said, 'You know what? I'm going to put donor on my driver's license right now,'" Michelle said.

Greg Allen, one of Orville's sons, said the ability to donate their dad's organ was uplifting in an otherwise sad time.

"To me, it's just a wonderful thing to be able to help somebody else, anybody else, to extend their life for their family," Greg Allen said.

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