

# Why bone marrow donations are important



Your bone marrow, the spongy tissue inside your bones, is responsible for making blood cells. When it gets damaged by disease, infections, or chemotherapy, you need a bone marrow transplant, but finding a donor can be tricky. This is how bone marrow donations can help.

Your bone marrow plays an important role in your body as it produces red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets.

If your bone marrow stops producing these important blood cells, you may start suffering from anaemia and your body is more vulnerable to disease and infection. Without regular blood transfusions, sufferers have a small chance of survival, but the good news is that a bone marrow transplant, a medical procedure that is performed to replace damaged bone marrow, can give patients a new lease on life.

During the procedure, stem cells that are taken from the blood of a donor that can differentiate into bone marrow cells are transplanted. They travel to the bone marrow to promote the growth of new bone marrow, which can then make new blood cells.

## Finding a match

Although a bone marrow transplant is the best chance for most patients' survival, finding the right donor can be a challenge. Currently, your chances of finding a matching donor is 1 in 100 000. Most patients are dependent on strangers with similar genetic characteristics for blood stem cell donations.

## How to become a bone marrow donor

If you are a healthy person between the ages 18 and 45, weigh more than 50kg, and have a body mass index of less than 40, you can register as a bone marrow donor. You won't be able to register if you:

- Have been exposed to hepatitis B, hepatitis C, or HIV.
- Have injected yourself with illegal drugs.
- Have unsafe sex.
- Got a tattoo or a piercing in the last year.
- Are pregnant or had a baby in the last year.
- Have or have had cancer.

## How it works:

Choose an organisation, like the Sunflower Fund in South Africa, to register as a donor.

They will perform blood tests and your details will be entered into their register, to be screened every time they're in need of a donor.

If you are found to be a match for someone, you will undergo a medical examination to ensure you are still in good health.

If found healthy, you will then undergo a series of therapies, which will take place five days prior to the donation procedure. This will increase the production and release of the stem cells into your blood stream. The procedure, which is similar to donating blood, is not painful and you shouldn't experience any side effects afterwards, other than mild flu-like symptoms – a small price to pay for saving someone else's life!

For more information, you can visit the Sunflower Fund or consult your Employee Wellbeing Programme.