

Saturday Observer

Blood donations 101: Dr. Heather Hume and Dr. Barbara Hannach of Canadian Blood Services sat down with the Citizen's Doug Fischer this week to explain the entries on the agency's donor questionnaire.

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1a) Are you feeling well today?

1b) Do you have a cold, flu, sore throat, fever, infection or allergy problem today?

Donors have been asked questions like these for decades. In fact, a half-century ago they were the only questions. Mainly, they are intended to protect the donor -- if you're not feeling well, it's probably not a great idea to give up half a litre of blood. But it is also possible that the blood of a donor answering 'No' to 1a) or 'Yes' to 1b) could be infected.

"The attending nurse has some discretion here," says Dr. Hume, "but I think often the donor will be asked to come back another day if he reports he's unwell."
And until a test is devised for West Nile virus, these questions remain one of the best ways to detect symptoms of that disease.

2a) In the last three days have you taken any medicine or drugs (pills including Aspirin or shots), other than birth control pills and vitamins?

Every drug approved for use in Canada is tested for its effect on blood. The vast majority do not have adverse effects, but some --even in trace amounts -- can be harmful to the recipient of a transfusion. To be sure, each attending nurse has a copy of the Donor Selection Criteria Manual, a thick binder full of detailed information about each question on this survey.

2b) In the last three days have you had dental work?

Because the mouth is a breeding ground for bacteria, dental procedures that involve bleeding can result in infected blood. The infection works its way out of the blood within 72 hours. As a result, anyone answering 'Yes' to this question is asked to return three or more days after visiting a dentist.

The blood agency will be asking Health Canada to relax this provision in cases where the dental work does not involve bleeding (X-rays, for instance).

3a) In the last three months have you had a vaccination?

Vaccines come in two general types and each is handled differently.
A donor who has been given a so-called kill vaccine, one that directly attacks a disease -- influenza and tetanus vaccines are examples -- is only required to wait 48 hours before giving blood.

However, someone who has received a live attenuated vaccine, one that introduces a small dose of the disease to stimulate a person's immune system -- shots for mumps, measles, rubella fall in this category -- must wait three months because of the potential risk to the blood recipient.

3b) In the last three months have you taken Accutane for skin problems?

Studies have linked Accutane, a synthetic form of Vitamin A used to treat severe acne, with birth defects, including harelips, if taken during the first trimester of pregnancy. Because it is stored in the body's fat for long periods, anyone who has taken Accutane is not eligible to donate blood for three months after the ending the medication.

4a) In the last six months have you been under a doctor's care, had surgery, taken Cyclomen (danazol)? "Donors sometimes forget so we repeat questions in different ways to jog their memory," says Dr. Hannach by way of explaining the first two parts of this odd catch-all question.

Again, the nurse is given discretion depending on the answers. For instance, recent minor surgery for removal of a cyst would likely not affect eligibility to donate blood, whereas a major organ operation -- even six months before -- would likely result in a temporary deferral.

Cyclomen, the brand name for a drug commonly known as danazol, is used to treat excessive menstrual bleeding, endometriosis and fibrocystic breast disease. Its harmful side-effects include jaundice, hair loss, acne and emotional problems. Users of the drug are ineligible to donate blood for six months after ending its use.

4b) If female, in the last six months have you been pregnant?

Women are prone to iron deficiencies while pregnant and while breastfeeding, a situation that would be exacerbated by the 250-milligram iron loss that results from donating a unit of blood. This question is intended to protect the donor more than the recipient.

4c) In the last six months have you taken Proscar for prostate problems, Propecia or Methotrexate? Studies suggest that, even in trace amounts, Proscar, used to treat prostate illness, Propecia, a hair-loss medication, and Methotrexate, a rheumatoid arthritis drug, can lead to problems for blood recipients. Prospective donors must wait at least six months after ending the use of these medications before giving blood.

5a) In the last 12 months have you had a tattoo, ear piercing, skin piercing, acupuncture, electrolysis, graft, injury from a needle, or come in contact with someone else's blood?

Because these activities mostly involve puncturing of the skin, they carry a higher-than-normal risk of infection from hepatitis and HIV-AIDS. The 12-month safety period is there to ensure that the blood of anyone exposed to infection would have time to develop anti-bodies that can be detected by testing.

5b) In the last 12 months have you had a rabies shot?

Although the rabies vaccine itself leaves the blood within 48 hours and would not affect a donation, a one-year safety period has been put in place to protect against actual exposure to rabies, an incurable disease. Most people -- zoology workers and animal control officers, for instance -- who are vaccinated get the shots as a preventive measure. Others, however, are vaccinated after an encounter with an animal thought to be rabid.

6a) Have you ever taken Tegison or Soriatane for skin problems?

These skin medications have been separated from Accutane (see 3b) because they remain in the body for much longer periods. As a result, anyone who has taken either is permanently ineligible to donate blood.

6b) Have you ever taken the human pituitary growth hormone or the human pituitary gonadotrophin hormone (sometimes used for treatment of infertility or to promote weight loss)?

6c) Have you ever received a dura mater (brain covering) graft?

Until the 1980s, growth hormones and infertility treatments were harvested from the human pituitary. After an outbreak of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease in France -- no one in Canada was affected -- users were made permanently ineligible to donate blood. Similarly, recipients of skin grafts using human dura mater -- a membrane surrounding the brain also linked to CJD -- are permanently ineligible to give blood.

7a) Have you ever had: yellow jaundice (other than at birth), hepatitis or liver problems?

Because each of these has a direct effect on blood, sufferers are generally rejected permanently as blood donors.

7b) Have you ever had: epilepsy, coma, stroke, convulsions or fainting?

7c) heart or blood pressure problems or heart surgery?

7d) cancer, diabetes, ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease?

7e) kidney, lung or blood problems?

Donating blood could complicate the conditions listed in these questions, so the decision on whether to reject or accept a donation depends on the severity of each. The decision can sometimes be made using guidelines contained in the donor criteria manual. Other times, a potential donor is sent to his or her doctor for a detailed assessment.

7f) Have you ever had: Chagas' disease, babesiosis or leishmaniasis?

Because these nasty parasitic diseases may lie dormant for years, and can be transmitted by blood, sufferers are permanently barred from donating.

8a) Have you ever had malaria?

Although the red blood cells of anyone who has had malaria cannot be used for any blood product that is directly transfused into a recipient, their plasma can be heat-treated and used for other blood products.

8b) In the last three years, have you been outside Canada, other than the U.S.?

This question is intended to find out whether a potential donor has been in a high-risk malaria area in the previous 36 months. If so, the person is ineligible to donate blood for six months after returning to Canada. If malaria does not show up, they are free to donate.

9a) Have you spent a total of three months or more in the United Kingdom (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Man, or the Channel Islands) since January 1, 1980?

9b) If you have been in the United Kingdom since 1980, did you receive a blood transfusion or any medical treatment with a product made from blood?

9c) Have you spent a total of three months or more in France since January 1, 1980?

9d) Have you spent a total of five years or more in Europe since January 1, 1980?

These questions were added in the '90s in response to incidents of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease in Europe. A potential donor answering 'Yes' to any of the questions is permanently ineligible to give blood.

10. Are you aware of a diagnosis of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease among any of your blood relatives (parent, child, sibling)?

This question was added in '97 to flag a rare, familial form of CJD once thought transmissible through blood. Recent studies suggest it is not, but for now the question remains on the survey and anyone answering 'Yes' is permanently barred from giving blood.

11. Have you ever had an AIDS (HIV) test other than for donating blood?

In some circumstances -- an HIV-AIDS test taken for insurance purposes, for example -- a 'Yes' answer to this question would not affect eligibility to give blood. In other cases -- a test taken after sex with a prostitute, for instance -- the potential donor would be barred for life. This is the first of several questions related to HIV-AIDS.

12. In the past 12 months have you been in jail or prison?

This question was included in response to the high rate of HIV-AIDS and hepatitis in Canada's prisons. The question applies only to inmates -- technically, to anyone who has been in a prison longer than 72 hours -- and does not affect guards, who are eligible to give blood as long as they meet all the other criteria. Women or men who have made conjugal visits in the previous year must wait six months before donating.

13a) Have you ever attended a blood donor clinic elsewhere in Canada?

13b) Have you ever given blood under a different name?

Because the blood agency's databases are not yet directly linked across Canada, 13a) is designed to find out whether donation records exist elsewhere. The local office would then ask to have them transferred. The second question is mainly intended to help the blood agency trace the records of women who have changed their name after marriage. This is the final answer to be filled out by the donor. The next questions are asked orally by the duty nurse.

14a) Do you have AIDS?

14b) Have you ever had a positive test for HIV or AIDS?

These questions were added in the '80s in the shadow of the tainted blood scandals. Anyone answering 'Yes' is barred from giving blood for life.

15. Have you used cocaine within the last 12 months?

This refers only to cocaine taken orally or through the nose and not by needle. The main concern is a user could become infected by HIV-AIDS or hepatitis by breaking a blood vessel in the nose with a straw used to snort the drug. A 'Yes' answer restricts the user from giving blood for 12 months, the time needed to ensure no infection has taken place.

16. Have you ever taken illegal drugs or illegal steroids with a needle even one time?

Because of the high-risk association between illegal intravenous drug use and HIV-AIDS and hepatitis, needle users are barred from giving blood for life -- with one exception. If a needle-injected steroid was used for bodybuilding, a one-year deferral is imposed.

17. At any time since 1977, have you taken money or drugs for sex?

Prostitutes run a high risk of contracting HIV-AIDS, hepatitis and sexually transmitted disease. A 'Yes' answer means a lifetime ban from donating blood.

18. Male donors: Have you had sex with a man, even one time since 1977?

First asked in '83, this question has been a source of controversy for more than a decade among gay groups, who say it is outdated, discriminatory, too blunt -- and too vague -- to accomplish its objective of turning up donors infected with HIV-AIDS. Answering 'Yes' means a lifetime ban on donating blood. A blood agency advisory panel examined the question as recently as last fall, but decided to keep it in place, arguing that while every unit of donated blood is tested for infection, those tests are not perfect.

19. Have you ever taken clotting factor concentrates for a bleeding disorder such as hemophilia?

Two issues are at work here. In the early '80s, before the blood products that hemophiliacs require to survive were heat-treated, many became infected with HIV-AIDS through transfusions. Secondly, the blood of hemophiliacs contains coagulation deficiencies -- a missing clotting factor -- and is not ideally suited to be donated to the blood supply.

For these reasons, those answering 'Yes' to the question are permanently ineligible to give blood.

20. Have you had sex with anyone who has AIDS or has tested positive for the HIV or AIDS?

The premise of this question is straightforward: Anyone having sex with a high-risk partner cannot be sure he or she has not been infected. A 'Yes' answer means a lifetime ban from giving blood.

21. Have you had sex in the last 12 months with anyone who has used cocaine?

A spinoff from Question 15. Anyone answering 'Yes' is ineligible to donate for a year, the time needed to ensure no HIV-AIDS or hepatitis infection has taken place.

22. Female donors: In the past 12 months, have you had sex with a man who had sex, even one time since 1977, with another man?

A spinoff of Question 18, the question is aimed at women who have had sex with bisexual men, a high-risk population for HIV-AIDS. Again, a 'Yes' answer means a potential donor is barred from giving blood for a year after the last sexual contact.

23. Have you had sex in the last 12 months with anyone who has ever taken illegal drugs or illegal steroids with a needle?

Another question aimed at anyone who's had sex with a high-risk group for AIDS-HIV and hepatitis. Once again, a 'Yes' answer requires a 12-month waiting period to ensure no infection has taken place.

24. At any time in the last 12 months, have you paid money or drugs for sex?

Question 17 is aimed at finding the prostitutes themselves; this one is intended to weed out the johns. It means a 12-month waiting period for anyone answering 'Yes.'

25. At any time in the last 12 months, have you had sex with anyone who has taken money or drugs for sex?

A fairly narrow spinoff of Question 24, this one is aimed at the partners of prostitutes. It is a good example of how the questionnaire attempts to leave no stone unturned in weeding out high-risk donors. A 'Yes' answer means a donor is barred from giving blood for a year after the last sexual contact.

26. Have you had sex in the last 12 months with anyone who has taken clotting factor concentrates?

A spinoff of Question 19 designed to track the sex partners of a high-risk group -- those who might have taken a clotting factor before blood products were heat-treated to eliminate infection. Anyone answering 'Yes' must observe a 12-month waiting period before donating blood.

27. In the last 12 months, have you had or been treated for syphilis or gonorrhea?

Another straightforward premise -- to keep infection out of the blood supply -- but with an underlying reason: Anyone with syphilis or gonorrhea is more likely to have HIV-AIDS or hepatitis than the rest of the population. A 'Yes' answer means a deferral from donating blood for a year after the end of treatment.

28. In the last 12 months, have you received blood or blood products by transfusion for any reason, such as an accident or surgery?

Although the risk of infection from blood received through transfusion in Canada is very low, this question was added as an extra precaution. Again, a 12-month waiting period is required for anyone answering 'Yes.'

29. In the past 12 months, have you had sex with someone whose sexual background you don't know?

On the theory that what you don't know can hurt you, this question is intended to cover situations not dealt with by the more specific questions. A 'Yes' answer restricts a potential donor from giving blood for 12 months, the time needed to ensure no infection has taken place.

30a) Were you born in or have you lived in any of the following countries since 1977: Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Niger or Nigeria?

30b) If you have travelled to any of those countries since 1977, did you receive a blood transfusion or any medical treatment with a product made from blood?

30c) Have you had sexual contact with anyone who was born in or lived in these countries since 1977?

These countries have high levels of the HIV-O virus, a strain of HIV that the blood agency's testing is not designed - or licensed -- to detect, but usually does. A 'Yes' answer means a lifetime ban from giving blood.

Photo: Bruno Schlumberger, The Ottawa Citizen / (A person giving blood)