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Give Blood, Give Life: Health District Encouraging Residents to Donate Blood for Blood Donor Month

Do you know the number one reason why people do not donate blood? According to the American Red Cross, it is because they have never thought about it before. For this reason, the Central Connecticut Health District is urging residents to think about giving one more time this winter season. To increase awareness of the constant need for blood and to help replenish low supplies after the holidays, the month of January has been designated as Blood Donor Month.

Even though the need for blood exists all year long, there are certain periods when the level of donations falls off. Many times, this shortfall occurs when the demand for blood is the highest. The most common times that blood supplies run low are during summer vacation months and during the winter holidays. Blood shortages occur when the supply of blood falls below the optimal 3-day supply. Unfortunately, increased travel and entertaining during the holiday season often results in higher incidence of trauma cases requiring blood.

Every year, 4.5 million American lives are saved by blood transfusions. More than 38,000 blood donations are needed every day; for every pint of blood donated, three lives can be saved. While 37% of the population of this country is eligible to give blood, less than 10% donate annually.

Giving blood is a safe, relatively painless procedure. Potential donors need not fear becoming ill from donating blood, because each needle used is sterile and disposed of after one use. Receiving donated blood is also safe; all blood is tested for HIV, Hepatitis B and C, syphilis and other infectious diseases before it is used. To become a blood donor, you must be in good health and weigh at least 110 pounds. Most states require donors to be at least 17 years old, although 16 year olds may donate in some states. There are no upper age limits for giving blood. It is safe to give a pint of blood as often as every 8 weeks.

The actual time spent giving blood is about 10 minutes. The entire procedure includes registration, completing a health history, checking your temperature, blood pressure, and iron level, donating the blood, and a stop at the canteen for refreshments.

Most blood donors tend to give a pint of whole blood. Once blood has been donated, it is processed and available for use 24-48 hours later. Whole blood is broken down into various components: red cells, which may be stored up to 42 days; platelets, which have a 5-day shelf life; and plasma, which can be frozen and stored for up to 12 months. The red cells are needed to bring oxygen to tissue and organs, platelets are required for blood to clot, white cells fight infections, and plasma provides a mixture of water, salts, and proteins.

Another type of blood donation is possible, called apheresis. In this process, only a specific component of the blood is donated, such as platelets. This procedure takes longer, about 2 hours, and is very similar to the whole blood donation process. Apheresis allows for the collection of a greater number of the desired component than is possible when one unit of whole blood is donated. For example, without apheresis, one blood transfusion would require 5 to 10 donors to collect enough platelets. Now, it is possible to collect all the needed platelets from just one donor, and the rest of the blood is returned to that donor once the platelets have been separated out.

People who should not give blood include the following: anyone who is sick with a cold, flu or fever; anyone with AIDS or one of its symptoms; anyone who had hepatitis after age 11 or has come into contact with an individual who has hepatitis within the past 12 months and anyone who contracted malaria within the past 3 years. Regarding tattoos, donating blood is acceptable if the tattoo was applied by a state-regulated entity using sterile needles and ink that is not reused. There are 32 states that currently regulate tattoo facilities. You should discuss your particular situation with the health historian at the time of donation

There are additional illnesses and lifestyles that will prevent someone from donating blood as well, so it is important that complete information be given during the medical history portion of the donation process.

To find out how to be a blood donor or to learn about upcoming blood donation sites, contact the American Red Cross at 1-800-GIVE-LIFE, or look online at www.givelife.org. Further information may also be obtained at the Central Connecticut Health District, serving the towns of Berlin, Newington, Rocky Hill and Wethersfield, at 860-721-2822 or at www.ccthd.org.