

Organ and Tissue Donation at End-of-life



This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:
www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

Prepared by: Legacy of Life Organ and Tissue Donation Program
Designed and Managed by: Library Services

WD85-2560 © December 2025 Nova Scotia Health Authority
To be reviewed December 2028 or sooner, if needed.
Learn more: <https://library.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources>



[illegible]

Questions?

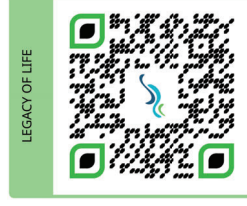
- Organ donation coordinators are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Call Locating and ask to talk with an organ donation coordinator:
 - › Phone: 902-473-2222

Legacy of Life: Nova Scotia Organ and Tissue Donation Program

Park Lane Terraces
Suite 300, 3rd Floor
5657 Spring Garden Road
Halifax, NS B3J 3R4

- › Phone (toll-free): 1-844-411-LIFE (5433)
- › Email: Legacyoflife@nshealth.ca
- › www.nshealth.ca/legacy-life

Scan the QR code on your device (open the camera on your device, point the camera at the code, and tap the banner or border that appears)



Organ and Tissue Donation at End-of-life

- It is very hard to hear that someone you love is very sick or badly hurt and that nothing more can be done to save their life. You may feel shocked, scared, and anxious about what will happen next. This is normal.
- You may hear words like:
 - › Comfort care
 - › Palliative care
 - › Withdrawing life support
- This can be confusing and upsetting. This pamphlet gives information about:
 - › What these words mean
 - › What to expect during this time
 - › Organ and tissue donation after death

What is end-of-life care?

- End-of-life care (also called **comfort care** or **palliative care**) is care given when a person is dying. It focuses on keeping the person comfortable, managing their pain, and supporting their cultural, spiritual, and/or religious needs.

- Your health care team has done everything they could to try to save your loved one's life. But their illness or injury is too serious, and they will not get better.
- As part of end-of-life care, your health care team will contact Legacy of Life. This is Nova Scotia's organ and tissue donation program.
- Organ and tissue donation can help save or improve the lives of others. It can also be comforting to know your loved one helped other people and will be remembered. Many people say it gives them hope and a sense of peace during a very hard time. A donation coordinator may meet with you to talk about this.

What is life support?

- Life support is the use of machines or medications to help a person stay alive.
For example:
 - › A ventilator helps a person breathe by giving their body oxygen.

- Donation does not affect funeral plans. Open casket funerals, green burials, and cremation are all possible after organ or tissue donation. All efforts are made so that there are no signs that the person was a donor.

You are not alone. Legacy of Life is here to support you. They can offer care and comfort, and help you cope with your loss.

Why is donation important?

- One donor can save up to 8 lives and help up to 75 people through tissue donation. This gift can bring healing and hope to many people.
- Right now, hundreds of people in Atlantic Canada are waiting for a second chance at life through transplant.
- For many people, knowing their loved one helped others brings comfort during their grief. It can bring a sense of peace, pride, and meaning during a very sad time.
- Organ and tissue donation is a powerful and generous act of kindness. It is one of the most meaningful gifts a person can give.

How long does organ and tissue donation take?

- It may take 48 to 72 hours to do all the steps needed to safely donate organs and tissue, and to find the people who need them most.

What do I need to do?

- Your health care team will ask for your consent (permission) to have your loved one donate. **This is your choice. You can change your mind at any time.**
- The donation coordinator may also ask about your loved one's:
 - › Health
 - › Medications
 - › Travel history
 - › Lifestyle

What will happen after my loved one has donated?

- The donation team will make every effort to avoid slowing down your funeral plans. As soon as your loved one has donated, their body will be released to you or to a funeral home. This is usually within 24 hours (1 day).

What does it mean to withdraw life support?

- Withdrawing (taking away) life support means stopping the machines or medications helping your loved one stay alive.
- Doctors recommend withdrawing life support when they are sure that a person cannot get better in a way that would give them the kind of life they would want.
- If your health care team recommends stopping your loved one's life support, they will talk with you about:
 - › What to expect
 - › How they will support your loved one and you
- These conversations are guided by care, compassion, and respect for your loved one's wishes.
- Before your loved one's life support is stopped, you will be given time and privacy to say goodbye in your own way.
 - › If you have any cultural, spiritual, or religious practices, please tell a member of your health care team. We will do our best to support your wishes.

- After your loved one's life support is stopped, they may pass away within a few hours or days. The amount of time is different for each person.

Can I stay with my loved one?

- Yes. You may stay with your loved one while they are taken off life support and as they pass away.

Why are we talking about organ donation now?

- Your health care team will only talk with you about organ donation when doctors are sure your loved one cannot get better. This will only happen after they have tried all medical treatments and nothing more can be done to save your loved one's life.
- Organ donation is only possible if a person is on life support. If your loved one is on life support, we will call the donation team to find out if your loved one can donate organs to help others.

- The donation team will work quickly to check if your loved one's organs and tissues are healthy and safe to donate.
 - › Your loved one can still donate some organs or tissues even if others cannot be used. Each organ is checked carefully on its own.
- If your loved one is registered as a donor in Nova Scotia, it will be noted on their health card. The donation coordinator will meet with you to talk about your loved one's wishes and make sure they would still want to donate.

What will happen if I decide to have my loved one donate?

- The donation coordinator will explain what will happen and answer any questions you may have.
- If you decide that your loved one would want to donate, the donation team will guide and support you.
- If you decide that your loved one would not want to donate, your health care team will still give your loved one and you care, comfort, and respect.