

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) - Heart Transplant

How do I know if I need a heart transplant?

Some patients with severe heart disease may benefit from transplantation. A discussion with a cardiologist who specializes in heart failure will help to determine if it might be appropriate to undergo an evaluation by a multidisciplinary team.

Is the evaluation process difficult?

The transplant evaluation process is very thorough. In addition to heart testing, tests will be performed to assess the function of all major organ systems. Screening tests for infectious diseases and cancers will be performed. In addition to the physicians on the team, you will be assessed by multiple other disciplines to try and predict how well you and your family will cope with the rigors of the transplant regimen.

The multidisciplinary team will meet weekly to discuss the patient evaluations and decide on appropriate treatment. The outcomes can range from: approved for listing, needs additional testing, or declined for stated reasons.

If approved for listing, when will I be added to the UNOS (United Network for Organ Sharing) waiting list?

Following committee approval, the financial coordinator will submit information to your insurance company for approval.

All health maintenance results will need to be completed/submitted to the transplant office prior to listing.

Once all results and insurance clearance are received, you will be contacted and added to the UNOS waiting list.

What does it mean if additional testing is needed?

The transplant coordinator will relay what testing the committee has requested and help you to schedule or send an order for the needed testing. Once the results come back to the transplant office, you will again be presented to the Patient Selection Committee. You will be notified following that discussion.

If I am declined, what does that mean?

If the Patient Selection Committee decides that transplant is not the best option at this time, it will provide you a detailed rationale for this decision. Sometimes this occurs because you are too well for transplant, or it can be that there are issues that make you an inappropriate candidate at this time.

You can always request that your evaluation records be forwarded to another transplant center for consideration there.

How long is the waiting list?

Wait times will vary depending on how sick you are. People who require hospitalization and/or mechanical support may receive a heart before those waiting at home. When you are added to the wait list, you will be assigned a status from one to six, which designates your medical urgency for transplant. Your status can change as your health may improve or worsen.

What happens when an organ offer is available?

The transplant team will review donor organ offers to determine if they're suitable for the identified recipient. The transplant coordinator will notify you when an organ has been accepted for you. You will be asked questions regarding your health status and be informed about when you need to report to the WVU Medicine Transplant Alliance Clinic.

You will be provided a time to arrive to begin pre-op procedures. You may wait for 24+ hours before going to pre-op. Home medications for you and your support person should be brought in with you.

How long will transplant surgery last?

On average, surgery can take four to six hours once begun. Family may feel time is longer as you may be waiting in the Pre-op/OR room for a period of time.

How long will I be in the hospital?

Although this will vary person to person, on average discharge will occur 10-14 days after the transplant procedure.

Will I have pain after surgery?

Many heart transplant patients state that they do not have pain after transplant but some discomfort. The incision can cause pain and/or discomfort when you cough. Pain medication will be provided to help control that pain as it will be very important for deep breathing and coughing to prevent infections in your lungs.

Can my family stay with me?

We encourage your family to be present while waiting for the transplant surgery to begin. Following surgery, you will be in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) to start your recovery. Family will be permitted in for short periods of time according to the ICU guidelines. WVU Medicine has very open visiting hours at which time family is encouraged to provide emotional support— but be aware that rest is an important part of recovery.

The transplant team can help to direct to local accommodations for family members to get their own rest/relaxation.

Anyone who is ill (such as a cold or flu) should not visit.

When can I drive?

After heart transplantation, you can drive when your sternum (breastbone) is fully healed. This takes about six to eight weeks.

When can I return to work?

Depending on your line of work, typically you can return in two to three months following heart transplant. You may wish to discuss career counseling with the transplant social worker.

How long does it take to fully recover?

Generally, it takes three to six months for full recovery from surgery. Keep in mind that age and previous medical problems may cause a longer recovery.

This information is for educational purposes only and not intended to replace the advice of your Transplant team. Please contact the WVU Medicine Transplant Alliance Office at 304-974-3004.