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Why Transfusion Affects Donors

In tissue donation, rules and guidelines can quickly change to reflect new medical information. One important rule may affect whether you can donate bone. If you have received blood, since 1st January 1980, we cannot accept your bone. The Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service (SNBTS) has developed this leaflet to explain why this decision has been taken and what it means to you. This new rule applies to everyone who has received blood on or after 1 January 1980.

The vast majority of us in the UK have been exposed to BSE through eating beef, therefore most of us are to some degree at risk of developing vCJD. It is not surprising then, that some of the people who have developed vCJD have been blood donors in the past.

SNBTS are advised by experts and believe that the chance of contracting vCJD from a blood transfusion is very small. What we are doing is excluding people who, as a group, may have a slightly higher risk of having been exposed to vCJD, ie through the food chain and by blood transfusion.

To put this in context, the UK population is 59 million and fewer than 160 cases of vCJD have been reported in the UK since the disease was first described in 1996. Of these cases, fewer than 20 have been blood donors. When you received blood your doctor would have considered this risk very small and balanced it against the very real risk to your health if you did not receive the blood transfusion.

Why Do We Need The Precautionary Measure?

Recently a patient who had previously received a blood transfusion died with vCJD. The donor of the transfused blood had been well at the time they donated the blood but later also died with vCJD. A second patient who was transfused with blood from someone who later developed vCJD was also found to have been infected at post mortem examination, however died of other unrelated causes (ie not vCJD). Although it is possible these patients contracted the disease through eating meat containing the agent that causes BSE, the government believe it is safer to assume the vCJD may have been passed on through blood transfusion.

Due to measures taken over the last 10 years, it is thought that the risk of catching vCJD from eating beef containing BSE in the UK is now very small. In the absence of other methods of transmission, this should mean that the disease will eventually disappear. This is supported by the fact that the number of cases reported each year appears to be reducing. Therefore it is very important that we minimise the small risk of vCJD being transmitted.

Experts agree that before this date it is very unlikely anybody in the UK was exposed to the agent that causes vCJD and therefore there is no possibility that it could have been transmitted by the blood transfusion.

What is Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD)?

Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD) is one of a group of rare diseases that affect the brain and nervous system. CJD cases have occurred naturally in several forms for many years. The more recently occurring vCJD, first described in 1996, is believed to be the consequence of eating beef containing the agent that causes BSE which was found in UK cattle herds after 1980.

Is the UK blood supply safe?

Up to three million blood transfusions are performed every year in the UK - blood has saved millions of lives and will continue to do so. The UK has an excellent record for blood safety. We ask donors many questions before they are accepted to give blood and we use extremely sensitive tests and controls designed to reduce known risks. We also have a comprehensive quality system that is approved by the government regulator for medicines. However, a blood transfusion, like any medical procedure, can never be zero risk. Because there is no screening test for vCJD, and it now appears possible that the agent may be passed on by blood transfusion, we must err on the side of caution when considering how we can further reduce the risk of passing on vCJD. This is why the new rule has been introduced.