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# Organ Donation and Religious Beliefs



A guide to organ and tissue  
donation and Jewish beliefs

# Judaism and organ donation

## Introduction to organ and tissue donation

Organ and tissue donation is the gift of an organ and/or tissue to help someone who needs a transplant. Hundreds of people's lives across Scotland are saved or improved each year by organ and tissue transplants, but, on average, every day someone in the UK dies while waiting for an organ transplant.

Organs that can be donated by people after death include the heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, pancreas, and small bowel. Tissue, such as heart valves, tendons, corneas, and skin can also be donated to help others. It is also possible for a living donor to give a kidney, bone, or sometimes part of their liver.

## When organ and tissue donation can take place after death

Doctors and other healthcare staff are committed to doing everything possible to save a patient's life. Organ or tissue donation is only considered after all attempts to save their life have failed.

The majority of organs are donated after 'brainstem death' has been confirmed. This is when vital centres in the brainstem that are essential for life are so damaged that the patient would not survive more than a few minutes without artificial support. After brainstem death, the patient will still be on a ventilator (a machine that pushes air into the lungs and supports the circulation of blood around the body). This prevents the organs from losing the oxygen-rich blood supply, which helps keep the organs functioning.

Brainstem death is not the same as being in a coma or vegetative state. In order to confirm brainstem death, two senior doctors who are independent of the transplant team must carry out very detailed tests on the patient on two separate occasions.

Alternatively, organs can be donated after 'circulatory death', which is after the patient's heart stops beating and they stop breathing. In these cases, the medical staff and the patient's family will have agreed to withdraw life-sustaining treatment because there is no realistic prospect of the patient recovering.

## **Judaism and organ donation**

The religious principle of *pikuach nefesh*, saving life, means that Jewish people are permitted, and even encouraged, to donate their organs after death, provided it is done in a way that is consistent with Jewish religious law.

## **If you save one life, you save the whole world.**

*Saving life is so important in Judaism that almost all other religious obligations must be set aside for that purpose. But, like everything in Judaism, there are detailed and careful guidelines for how and when this applies, so the new provision for people to specify the importance of their faith in the organ donation register is very welcome. We also welcome the assurances from the Scottish Government that people's religious beliefs will be respected when deciding whether organ donation may take place and throughout the whole donation process.*

*Rabbi Moshe Rubin  
(Giffnock & Newlands Hebrew  
Congregation)*

*Pikuach nefesh* means, for example, that religious requirements such as avoiding unnecessary interference with the body, and early burial can be set aside in order to facilitate organ donation.

The NHS Organ Donor Register enables people to state whether or not they are willing to donate their organs. It also enables potential donors to state that their faith is important to them, and that donation may only go ahead in accordance with their beliefs. Because of this, medical staff are aware that some people will wish a Rabbi to be consulted before any procedures leading to organ donation take place.

## **Family involvement**

Families play an important role in organ and tissue donation.

If you were to die in circumstances where you could be an organ donor, a specialist nurse would check the NHS Organ Donor Register to find out whether you had registered a decision either to donate or to opt out of donation. Very importantly, they would also speak to your family

to ask them whether you had ever expressed any views for or against being a donor and whether your faith would place any restrictions on donation. Health workers have a legal duty to ask relatives or friends about any relevant views or beliefs a potential donor may have expressed to ensure they are taken into account.

Many Jewish families will want to ask further questions such as how long burial might be delayed, and will want assurances that the body will be treated with respect throughout the donation process. If someone has stipulated on the NHS Organ Donor Register that their faith or beliefs are important and should be taken into account in the donation discussion, the family will be asked whether a Rabbi or religious authority should be consulted. But even if someone has not included that information in their record, the family can inform medical staff if the potential donor would have wanted donation to go ahead only if it could be done in accordance with Jewish religious law, and the information they provide will be respected.

Whatever your decision, it is important your family know what you want. For example, whether a diagnosis of 'brainstem death' would be acceptable to you, or whether you would only want donation to take place after 'circulatory death'. This will make it easier for your family to ensure that your views are respected, and your donation decision is honoured.

## Care and respect

After donation has been agreed, the removal of organs and tissues is carried out with the greatest care and respect. The family can, if they wish, remain with the body until it is taken to an operating theatre, and if they wish, a chaplain, a local Rabbi or lay leader, or their religious adviser can also be with them.

The operation to remove donated organs normally takes a few hours, after which the body can be returned to the family for immediate burial.

*The Liberal Jewish community welcomes the introduction of 'deemed authorisation' in the Scottish organ donation system. Judaism teaches that saving life is of paramount importance, and in our time, being registered as an organ donor can be regarded as a great mitzvah – both a religious commandment and a good deed. The new system helps us all to perform this good deed, and reminds us of our human responsibilities to one another.*

*Rabbi Mark Solomon  
(Edinburgh Liberal Jewish Community,  
Sukkat Shalom)*

# Making your choice

The NHS Organ Donor Register gives you three options:

- you can register as an organ donor to donate any organs or tissue,
- you can register to donate some organs and/or tissue but not others, and can specify which you are willing to donate, or
- you can register to opt out of organ donation, and not to become a donor.

You can also record on the register whether your faith or belief is important to you, and specify that donation should only proceed in accordance with those beliefs. There is also a copy of the 'Faith and Beliefs Commitment' available on the Organ Donation Scotland website, which provides information about how NHS staff would work with your family if you could be a donor to ensure that any donation is in line with your religious beliefs.

In addition, a specific Jewish faith statement is available on the Organ Donation Scotland website. This guides NHS staff and families as to the faith-related concerns of the donor and the role that religious authorities are now able to play in supporting the donation process. This is supplemented by a dedicated Jewish Hotline that enables the provision of real-time guidance in donation scenarios by Jewish religious authorities.

It is a good idea also to discuss organ donation with your family, and let them know your views.

To find out more about organ and tissue donation, your choices and how to register your donation decision visit:

**[organdonationscotland.org](https://organdonationscotland.org)**

Or call **0300 123 23 23**

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