

# Giving Blood Is an Easy Process

*by Sara O'Brien*

*Communications Manager American Red Cross Blood Services, Northern California Region*

Many people are uncomfortable with the idea of giving blood. Most say it's a fear of needles. But if you realize how much you can help others by giving blood, perhaps you can turn away when the phlebotomist is inserting the needle into your arm. It truly is a minor inconvenience when compared to saving a life.

For non-donors, part of the mystery of giving blood is the donation process. You may see a poster that says it takes an hour to donate blood. You think, "No way, I don't want a needle in my arm for an hour!" This is a misconception. The Red Cross just wants to make sure you realize that you need to allow an hour for the whole process. Some people walk in to a blood donation center and ask if they can get in and out in a few minutes. It's not quite that easy-but an hour is less than many people spend surfing the Internet daily.

To donate blood, it's usually best if you make an appointment in advance-whether you do it a month in advance or just a day in advance. If you don't have an appointment to donate when you go during your lunch break, and the blood center or blood drive is busy, you might end up walking away because it's not convenient for you to wait. We don't want to discourage you, but if you walk in, be prepared to spend some extra time or even be turned away. However, the blood center or blood drive may very well be able to accommodate you as a walk-in; it can't hurt to ask.

Before trying to give blood, make sure you meet the minimum requirements:

- You must be a minimum of 17 years old.
- You must weigh at least 110 pounds.
- You must be in general good health.

When you arrive at a blood center or drive, you'll sign in so we know you're there. Then you'll be given some information to read about reasons you would be disqualified from donating blood, so you can leave immediately if you're not eligible. What might make you ineligible? Travel to certain countries where malaria is rampant, taking certain medicines, or recent stays in jail can disqualify you from giving blood that day-and sometimes the deferral is permanent. About 40 percent of the population is ineligible to give blood, so there is a chance you might not be able to donate.

Next, you meet with a health historian in private. We need to see photo identification and/or a donor card to verify that you are who you say you are. You'll be asked a number of questions about your health and your lifestyle; you may find some of the questions a bit embarrassing. Don't worry, you aren't being singled out to answer those questions. We have to ask everyone the same questions. We meet with you in private to make it comfortable for you to answer the questions truthfully, even if it means you won't be able to give blood. The information is confidential, and it needs to be asked for the safety of the blood supply.

You'll also receive a mini-physical from the health historian-we take your temperature, check your blood pressure, and prick your finger to get a drop of blood. The blood drop is tested to make sure you have enough iron to provide a good pint of blood. Many women are temporarily deferred because of low iron levels in their body, commonly due to menstruation. To increase iron levels, try to eat foods rich in iron, such as beef and leafy green vegetables, during the day(s) before you come to donate blood.

Now it's time for the needle. No one really likes to be stuck with a needle, but it's the only way at this time that we can take your blood for someone in need. We collect one unit (about a pint) of blood from each person. (We also collect two small tubes of blood for testing purposes.) Men have about 12 pints of blood in their bodies and women have 10 pints of blood on average. It takes between 4 and 10 minutes to make your actual donation. Taking a pint isn't going to hurt you, but you can't donate blood every day! You can only donate blood 56 days after your last donation, because your body needs time to replenish your blood.

After your donation, you'll go to the canteen for a snack and a drink. The snacks aren't always the healthiest—they need to be able to last a long time and be easy to store and transport. This means you'll find raisins, cookies, and crackers. There will be water and juice to drink. Donors are required to remain in the canteen for 15 minutes—both to replenish themselves with the snacks and drinks, and so we can make sure you're feeling okay before you leave. A very small percentage of donors say they feel light-headed when they stand up, and we don't want them to immediately drive away.

Speaking of driving, you should be fine to drive following your donation. You should be fine to do any of your normal daily activities, unless your activities include training for a marathon. You should wait a day to resume any extreme physical activity. Professional athletes, for example, don't donate blood during their playing seasons because they need every edge they can get.

That's all there is to it. We'll give you a sticker to tell people to be nice to you because you donated blood that day. You can tell everyone you know that you helped save lives.

To give blood, call the American Red Cross at 800-GIVE-LIFE (448-3548) or go online to [www.BeADonor.com](http://www.BeADonor.com).