Heart Transplants From Donors With Hepatitis C?

Yes! An Alabama program allows organs to be transplanted from donors with hepatitis C into recipients who don't have the virus.

September 30, 2021 By Trent Straube

For 28 months, Colin Tucker was on a waiting list for a heart transplant. Finally, one became available through the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) Comprehensive Transplant Institute on October 28, 2020. But there was a catch: The heart came from a donor who had hepatitis C virus, which causes inflammation of the liver and can be fatal.

Tucker did not have hep C, yet he accepted the offer, UAB News reports, and the next day, he became the Alabama program's first heart transplant patient to receive a heart from a donor with hep C.

Why would someone willingly undergo an organ transplant that could lead to infection with a potentially dangerous virus? Because today hepatitis C is curable, and the antiviral treatment for it is highly effective and much easier to take than in the past. In many cases, it consists of daily tablets for about 12 weeks (for more details, see the Hep Basics section titled Hepatitis C Treatment).

The UAB transplant program has performed similar transplants since 2019. It began with kidney and liver transplants and has now expanded to include heart and lung transplants from donors with hep C.

Transplant recipients begin taking the hep C antivirals the day of their transplant and continue taking them for eight to 12 weeks. So far, UAB News reports, each transplant patient has responded to hep C therapy and therefore did not contract the virus.

"This program is safe; it is effective," José Tallaj, MD, medical director of UAB's Heart Transplant Program, told UAB News. "And it might decrease someone's waiting time because it opens the donor pool to a greater number of people. We want to ensure that all of our patients experience a good quality of life, and this program is a way to do that."

"When I received the call about the heart, they told me it came from a hepatitis C donor and explained to me how my risk of getting hepatitis C was extremely low," Tucker said. "It was no

longer a question of whether or not it was safe; it was a question of how soon I could get it. This was the only call I had received about a donor heart in two years, and here I am now, almost a year later, and doing fantastic."

Surely, such transplants will only become more common. As the Basics section on Hepatitis C reports, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that approximately 3.5 million people in the United States are chronically infected with hepatitis C. New HCV cases are steadily increasing, largely due to the opioid epidemic. The CDC estimates that there were 41,200 new hep C cases in 2016.

In related news, see "Hepatitis C–Positive Organ Transplants Are on the Rise," which reports that 803 organs used in transplants in the first five months of 2018 tested positive for hepatitis C. What's more, statistics from the United Network for Organ Sharing show that of the 37,396 organs used in transplants in 2017, a total of 1,491 were from donors with hepatitis C.

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