Will your child need a blood transfusion?

Like all medical treatments, a blood transfusion should only be given if it is essential.

The decision to give a blood transfusion to your child is made only after careful consideration. In making that decision, your child’s doctor will balance the risk of your child having a blood transfusion against the risk of not having one. Your child’s doctor or nurse should explain to you why your child needs a transfusion, and whether there may be alternative treatments available. Please ask if they do not.

Why might your child need a blood transfusion?

Most children cope well with losing a moderate amount of blood; the lost fluid can be replaced with other fluids. Over the next few weeks the body makes new red blood cells to replace those that are lost.

If larger amounts of blood are lost, a transfusion is the best way of replacing the blood rapidly.

Blood transfusions may be given to replace blood lost in surgery, or after serious accidents or they may be used to treat anaemia (lack of red blood cells) caused by failure of the body to make enough suitable blood cells.

Some medical treatments or operations cannot be safely carried out without giving any blood.

What can be done to reduce my child’s need for blood before an operation?

• Encourage your child to eat a well-balanced diet in the weeks before their operation. A leaflet called ‘Iron in your diet’ is available from the Welsh Blood Service, which gives further advice on this.

• Your child may need to have their iron levels boosted – ask your child’s doctor or senior nurse for advice, especially if you know that your child has had low iron levels in the past.

• If your child is taking blood-thinning or anti-inflammatory medicines, stopping these drugs may reduce the amount of bleeding in and around the time of the operation; but please ask your child’s doctor or senior nurse if it is safe to stop these medicines before their operation.

Please remember, for your child’s safety, only a qualified medical professional can make this decision.

Sometimes it is possible to collect blood that is lost during or after an operation and return it back to your child. You may want to ask if this method is available in the hospital or if it is suitable for your child’s case.

Can I donate my blood for my child?

No. This is a common question but there are good reasons why this is not done. There is an increased risk of some types of serious reactions following a blood transfusion from relatives. Unless blood from a close relative is specially treated with X-rays there is a risk that the transfused blood can trick the child’s immune system and bone marrow, resulting in bone marrow failure. It is better to avoid this risk.

Are blood transfusions safe?

Yes. The risk that a blood transfusion will make your child ill is very low. One of the most important ways of ensuring a safe transfusion is to make sure your child gets the right blood. To ensure that your child receives the correct blood, staff will check your child’s identity, both when they take blood samples and, along with the bag of blood, before the transfusion is given. This is why it is important that your child wears an identification band. If you are with your child, you should also be asked to confirm their full name, address and date of birth. Please remind the nurse or doctor to ask you this if they do not do so.

Compared to other everyday risks, the likelihood of getting an infection from a blood transfusion is very low. Blood donors are very carefully selected, and the donated blood is tested to make sure that it is suitable for transfusion.

The risk of getting hepatitis from a blood transfusion in the UK is about 1 in 670,000 for hepatitis B and 1 in 83 million for Hepatitis C (published January 2011). The chance of getting HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) infection is about 1 in 5 million or HTLV (Human T-Lymphotropic Virus) infection is about 1 in 18 million. Although the risk of getting variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) from a blood transfusion is probably low with a single blood transfusion, the risk of any infection will increase with additional blood transfusions.
Each year, approximately 2.5 million units of blood are transfused in the United Kingdom and there have been just a handful of cases where patients are known to have become infected with vCJD from a blood transfusion.

How is blood given?
A blood transfusion is usually given through a tiny tube directly into a vein. The amount of time each transfusion takes will depend on a variety of factors; your child’s doctor or nurse will be able to tell you more about this. Your child may be given more than one bag of blood as part of their treatment.

How will my child feel during their blood transfusion?
Most children feel no different at all during their transfusion. However, some develop a slight fever, chills or a rash. These are usually due to a mild reaction or allergy and are easily treated with medication or by giving the blood more slowly. Your child will be carefully monitored before, during and after the transfusion. Fortunately, severe reactions to blood are extremely rare. If they do occur, staff are trained to recognise and treat them. If your child feels unwell during or after their blood transfusion, please inform the nurse immediately.

What if my child and I have other worries about blood transfusion?
Your child may be afraid of needles, worried about being squeamish at the sight of blood or might have had a bad experience related to a previous blood transfusion. Please tell your doctor or nurse about any concerns you or your child may have, no matter how trivial you think they may be. Many hospitals have a dedicated Hospital Transfusion Team, and they may be able to come and discuss your concerns with you.

How can I become a blood donor?
Nationally we use thousands of units of blood per year in the treatment of children. If you would like to help others by becoming a blood donor, please call 0800 252266 or visit our website www.welshblood.org

Additional sources of Information
If you are interested in finding out more about blood transfusion and have access to the internet, you may find the following websites useful:

- Welsh Blood Service
  www.welshblood.org.uk

- NHS Choices
  www.nhs.uk/conditions/blood-transfusion

- UK Transfusion Services
  www.transfusionguidelines.org.uk

- NHSBT
  www.blood.co.uk

In order to plan for future blood demands, information about which patients receive blood needs to be gathered. We may ask a hospital or GP to provide limited medical information on a sample of patients who have received blood transfusions.

Any information that is passed on to WBS is held securely, with the rights of these patients protected under the Data Protection Act (1998).

For additional copies of this leaflet and for any further information please contact the Welsh Blood Service on 01443 622126.

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Note that as a precautionary measure to reduce the risk of transmitting vCJD, people who have received a blood transfusion since 1980 are not currently able to donate blood.