



## **Blood donor selection criteria and how they relate to men who have sex with men (MSM)**

**November 2017**

Men who last had oral or anal sex with another man more than 3 months ago are able to give blood if they meet the other blood donor selection criteria.

### **Ensuring blood supplies are safe**

The Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service (SNBTS) is committed to providing a safe, reliable source of blood and blood components to meet the needs of patients in Scotland. This includes a clear public duty to minimise the risk of a blood transfusion transmitting any infection to patients.

All donors are asked to complete a questionnaire to assess whether they meet the criteria to give blood. This is to ensure that the supply of blood to patients is as safe as possible.

If a potential donor answers 'yes' to a question that could suggest they are at an increased risk of carrying blood-borne infections, they may be deferred from giving blood. The period of time depends on the risk identified. For men who have had anal or oral sex with another man in the previous 3 months, they would be asked not to donate until 3 months have passed since this contact.

Current data suggest that approximately 5% of MSM in Scotland are positive for HIV, compared to an estimated 0.1% in the non IV drug-using heterosexual population. It is because of this health inequality that we are currently unable to accept donations from men who have had oral or anal sex with another man in the past 3 months. Women who have sex with women are eligible to give blood as evidence suggests that the prevalence of blood-borne virus in this group of people are lower than the rest of the population.

The current deferral for MSM reflects the statistical risks for the sexual behaviour that increases the risk of virus transmission.

Other cohorts of individuals are similarly affected by a 3 month deferral, these include:

- Men and Women who have had sex with a partner who has been sexually active in a country with high prevalence of HIV
- Male and Female partners of bisexual men
- Partners of IV Drug users

We know that it can be disappointing if you want to give blood but don't meet the donor selection criteria. Your support is just as important to us and we hope you will encourage others to give blood.

### **Decisions about who can give blood**



SNBTS are responsible for safely collecting blood and providing safe supplies to hospitals.

SNBTS donor selection policies and procedures are based on UK guidelines written by the Joint United Kingdom Blood Transfusion and Tissue Transplantation Services Professional Advisory Committee ([www.transfusinguidelines.org.uk](http://www.transfusinguidelines.org.uk)) and take account of the legal framework that UK blood services operate within. Significant changes to donor selection or blood safety are assessed by the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs (SaBTO). SaBTO will then make any necessary recommendations to the UK Departments of Health. We need to adhere to the decisions they make, to ensure blood transfusions are safe for patients.

### **Changes to this decision**

Before 2011 men who had sex with men were permanently excluded from giving blood.

This changed to a 12 month deferral in 2011, following a review of the statistical risks by SaBTO.

In July 2017, SaBTO published the Donor Selection Criteria Report, recommending a decrease in the deferral period from 12 to three months. This was implemented in Scotland from Nov 27<sup>th</sup> 2017.

### **FAQ**

#### **Why is there a 3 month deferral if all blood is tested?**

Every donation SNBTS receives is tested for infections including:

- Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)
- Hepatitis B virus (HBV)
- Hepatitis C virus (HCV)
- Human T-cell Lymphotropic Virus (HTLV)
- Syphilis
- Hepatitis E virus (HEV)

Although in recent years there have been advances in testing which have significantly improved blood safety in the UK, there is a small possibility the tests we carry out are not able to pick up recently acquired infections.

If someone was to donate blood during this time, known as a 'window period', the infection may not be detected but could be transmitted via a blood transfusion.

#### **I use condoms and/or I have had a negative test for HIV. Why can't I give blood?**

While safer sex, through the use of condoms, does reduce the transmission of infections, it cannot eliminate the risk altogether.



As there is a small possibility that tests for blood-borne infections such as HIV use may not pick up infections, particularly those which have been recently acquired, we must follow deferral rules that estimate risk based on sexual behaviours.

### **Why isn't there a deferral for promiscuous heterosexuals?**

MSM have been shown to be at a statistically increased risk of acquiring blood-borne viruses in the UK. A number of groups in addition to MSM are deferred or excluded from blood donation due to sexual behaviours which place them at an increased risk of acquiring a blood-borne virus (e.g. if you have had sex with someone who has been diagnosed with Zika virus).

### **Isn't there a risk of men who have sex with men who don't agree with the policy donating anyway?**

There is always that possibility for any of the blood donor selection criteria.

Blood donation works on the principles of kindness and mutual trust and we ask all potential and existing donors to adhere to the blood donor selection criteria by providing completely honest answers to all the questions asked, both for the protection of their own health and that of others.

Compliance with all donor selection criteria is crucial in order to ensure the continued safety of the blood supply.

Anyone may require a blood transfusion in the future and it is in the best interests of us all to ensure that we maintain blood safety.