

# THE BLOOD SERVICE DEFERRAL FOR MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN

## What is the Blood Service policy regarding blood donation for men who have sex with men?

If a man has had oral or anal sex with a man, including safer sex, he is unable to donate blood for 12 months after the last sexual contact.

## Is the Blood Service being discriminatory in not allowing gay men to donate?

The Blood Service is not discriminating against anyone based on their sexuality; rather the policies are based on assessment of risk. Deferrals are in place for a number of potential donors who may be more likely to be exposed to infection or present other risks to the recipient.

We have many deferrals in place based on travel and a number of other life events that could have resulted in the potential donor being exposed to a higher risk of infection.

Our deferral policies are not judging anyone. The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission agrees the Blood Service is not being discriminatory with our deferral policy for men who have sex with men.

## I'm in an exclusive relationship, why can't I donate blood?

The Blood Service recognises that there will be different levels of risk among men whose sexual partners are men. However, scientific modelling shows that overall – even men in a declared exclusive gay relationship – have, on average, a 50 times greater risk of HIV infection, compared to heterosexual Australians with a new sexual partner.

The latest report from the Kirby Institute shows that new HIV cases remain at concerningly high levels and that men who have sex with men continue to be the population in which the majority of new infections occur.

## Shouldn't I have the right to donate?

Nobody has the right to donate. Our greatest concern is safety. A donation is a wonderful gift, but there are many different reasons why a person cannot donate. We defer people for many reasons, including preservation of their own health.

## I disagree with you. Can't I skip the question about men who have sex with men?

The donor questionnaire is a legal document that people must answer honestly. The rules around who can and can't donate blood help to ensure that the blood supply in Australia is as safe as possible.

## Don't you test blood for HIV?

Yes, the Blood Service tests every donation. However, even this sensitive testing is unable to detect HIV, hepatitis B virus, and hepatitis C virus very early in the infection. You might hear this referred to as a 'window period' – it's a time when the infection is just starting and is not yet detectable. This is why we don't rely on testing alone.

## Why can't you ask more questions about behaviour to identify suitable donors?

Unfortunately more detailed questions about sexual practices are not practicable and will not change the scientific knowledge around the risk associated with men who have sex with men.

## It's been years since anyone was infected with HIV because of a blood donation. Surely it's time to relax the rules?

Evidence shows that it is the deferral system, alongside improved testing for HIV and other blood-borne diseases, that has kept transfusion-transmitted infection rates as low as they are.

In the general population, men who have sex with men accounted for 87 per cent of newly acquired HIV infections in Australia in 2015.

The rate of blood-borne infections amongst our donors is lower than the general population and this is because of our deferral systems.

## How do you come to these decisions?

The deferral is based on research and international policy decisions. An independent Australian review of blood donor deferrals recommended that sexually active gay men may be able to donate blood after a six month wait. Unfortunately the TGA, our regulator, did not approve a reduction in the deferral period to six months.

## What do they do in the rest of the world?

Australia is usually given as an example of one of the more liberal deferral policies. Many countries including Germany, Singapore and Denmark still have indefinite deferral for any man who has ever had sex with a man.

Progressively, other countries are moving to temporary deferrals, with the USA, UK, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Canada and France already having implemented 12-month deferrals.

For more information,  
visit [donateblood.com.au](http://donateblood.com.au) or call 13 14 95

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