

Making blood donation more inclusive with sexual behaviour-based screening for all donors

What was achieved?

New donor screening criteria has made blood donation more inclusive for donors, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation. In September 2022, following approval by Health Canada of our research-informed submission, Canadian Blood Services removed the blood donation eligibility criteria that specifically deferred sexually active gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (gbMSM) from donating blood. With this change, we now screen all donors based on sexual behaviours that are associated with a greater chance of acquiring a sexually transmitted infection that can be transmitted through transfusion. With these changes, gender-diverse donors can now register in their gender (currently limited to a binary sex option of male or female) and are no longer asked questions about lower genital gender-affirming surgery.

With the new screening criteria, all donors are asked whether they've had a new sexual partner or multiple sexual partners within the last three months. Only if the answer is yes are they asked a follow-up question about whether they've had anal sex. Donors must wait three months from when they last had anal sex with either a new partner or multiple partners to donate. If they have not had anal sex with a new partner or multiple partners and meet all other eligibility criteria, they are eligible to donate.

How was this achieved?

The original blood donation eligibility criteria implemented in 1988 recommended a permanent deferral for gbMSM who had had sex with other men since 1977. These criteria were adopted by Canadian Blood Services when our organization was founded in 1998. In 2013, the permanent deferral for gbMSM was shortened, based on the available scientific evidence, to a five-year waiting period. In 2016, Health Canada approved our request to reduce the waiting period to one year. And in 2019, further informed by findings from our Health Canada-funded research programs, it was further reduced to three months.

We drew on Canadian research, Canadian-specific risk modelling and international research to inform our successful submission to Health Canada in 2022. Much of the Canadian research we used came from research programs that focused on different screening approaches for blood and plasma donors. These programs were administered by Canadian Blood Services and funded by Health Canada. The research found the move to sexual behaviour-based screening to be acceptable, safe and feasible.

What was the impact and outcome?

Removing blood donation eligibility criteria specific to sexual orientation is a milestone change in Canada.

This long-awaited change marks a significant step in Canadian Blood Services' ongoing journey to build a more diverse, equitable and inclusive national transfusion and transplantation system without compromising the safety of the blood system or the security of supply.

To support the transition to sexual behaviour-based screening, our employees who work with donors, as well as many of our volunteers, completed training in having sex-positive conversations. This training was supported in part by research conducted in collaboration with community groups and our employees. It empowered our team members and volunteers to feel comfortable and prepared for the conversations they might have with donors around sexual behaviour.

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