

It hurts and five other myths about bone marrow donation and registration

Written by Kevin Walsh, TV Broadcaster & Bone Marrow Donor
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"Is it painful?" It's the most commonly asked question of bone marrow donors, and it's often asked rhetorically, because people believe they know the answer. In fact, most people believe that bone marrow donation is about as painful as childbirth or passing a kidney stone. But, while bone marrow donation isn't completely painless (you wake up feeling as if you just took a spill on the ice), it's nearly so. Doctors now harvest bone marrow while patients are under general anesthesia, so you don't feel a thing until you're already in recovery. Here are the five other common myths about bone marrow donation which is one of the most fascinating, but misunderstood, life-saving missions.

1. Myth: If you sign up as a potential donor, you're going to be poked with a needle. Not true. A simple cheek swab is all that's needed to check your tissue typing so you can be entered into the bone marrow registry. Because they fear the needle, untold numbers of people avoid the registration process entirely because they don't want to get stuck. If you make the first cut and turn up as a potential match for a particular patient, then you will have some blood work done later on that requires a needle. At that point, though, many potential donors are emotionally invested in the process (especially since, now, there's a specific person in need involved) and will do just about anything to help save a life.

2. Myth: You can only be a match for someone in your family. False. Most bone marrow matches come from strangers. The chance of your matching a brother or sister is only twenty-five percent. Seventy-five percent of bone marrow donations come from an unrelated donor, and that's why everyone who's eligible to register as a bone marrow donor (and whose religion permits it) should do so.

3. Myth: Bone marrow donation is highly risky and even life threatening for the donor. The truth is that donating bone marrow is less dangerous than you might think. There are two options: non-surgical and surgical. The non-surgical process is similar to platelet collection and involves the donor taking drugs prior to collection, to boost the body's production of stem cells. In the surgical collection of bone marrow, you're under general anesthesia. There is some risk, as there is for all surgeries, but there's no record of a donor dying from complications of a bone marrow harvest.

4. Myth: Bone marrow donors and recipients can meet before transplant. Actually, they can't meet unless they're family members. If you're donating to a family member, obviously you know the identity of that person. With unrelated bone marrow donation, neither party can know who the other person is, where they live, and the result of the transplant for at least six months. After six months, the donor can know the result of the transplant. After a year, if both parties consent, contact between the donor and recipient can be made. They often do, and it's usually very emotional and rewarding.

5. Myth: Everyone who needs a bone marrow transplant has leukemia. The fact is that some people who require a bone marrow transplant do have leukemia, but there are 75 different ailments that are treatable with bone marrow transplant. Most are blood diseases. And everyone who needs a bone marrow transplant is an individual, with individual health challenges, rather than part of a homogenous group. That's why the outcome of a bone marrow transplant is always uncertain -- but you never know what will happen until you try to save a life.

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Years ago, the pain associated with bone marrow transplants was the stuff of legend. Today, that's just not the case. The donor usually returns to work or school within a couple of days, and the body regenerates the removed marrow in about a week. Given the fact that most of the concerns that prevent people from registering as potential bone marrow donors are myths, it's a shame that so many people let their false beliefs prevent them from saving lives. If you can register as a bone marrow donor, check out the facts, and join the ranks of the everyday heroes who, literally, give the best of themselves to others.

Kevin Walsh is the author of *The Marrow in Me*, (Sports Challenge Network 2009), a past bone marrow donor and an accomplished television sports anchor with Comcast SportsNet New England. You can visit his website and blog at www.kevinwalshonline.com.