

Thicker Than Water

By Reg P. Wydeven
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I love free stuff. That's why in high school, I signed up to donate blood to get a free t-shirt and CD. Everything was going great until they stuck a huge needle in my arm and I watched my blood flowing out of my body through a little plastic tube. Suddenly the room got hotter by about 50 degrees and started to slowly spin. The nurses told me I turned as white as my new t-shirt and they did not allow me to leave. I did get free cookies and orange drink, though.

I think the idea of donating blood is extremely important – I just wish I had a stronger constitution when it came to donating mine. My dad shares my aversion to the sight of blood, however, he is much tougher than me. He has donated over 9 gallons of blood throughout his life. Because average adults have 10 pints of blood in their bodies, he's donated enough to fill 7 people!

Like my dad, there are lots of folks out there who generously donate their blood to help save countless lives. But, not everyone is eligible to donate. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration establishes standards for donating blood.

For starters, donors must be in good health, be at least 17 years old (or 16 with parental consent), weigh at least 110 pounds, and may only donate every 56 days. Donors must wait to give blood if they have cold or flu symptoms, including a cough, sore throat and/or fever. They must wait 24 hours after having dental work done, such as root canals, oral surgery, or extraction of wisdom teeth. Women must wait 6 weeks after pregnancy ends due to birth, miscarriage or termination.

Donors must wait one year after getting a blood transfusion, getting an ear or body piercing under non-sterile conditions or getting a tattoo. They must also wait 3 years after having malaria.

People are permanently banned if they have hepatitis, used IV drugs even once, have certain lung or liver disorders, or who take certain medications. Also, people cannot donate if they spent 3 months or more in the United Kingdom or certain European military bases from 1980 through 1996 or 5 or more years in Europe since 1980.

Finally, anyone with AIDS is precluded from donating, as is any man who has had sex with another man since 1977. The FDA imposed the ban on gay men in the 1980s in response to the AIDS epidemic, claiming that the prevalence of HIV infection among men who have had sex with other men is 60 times greater than that of the general population. Because of the ban, the FDA asserts that the risk of getting HIV from a pint of blood is now only one per 2 million units transfused.

However, men who have had sex with an HIV-positive woman or with a prostitute are only banned from donating for a year.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services will hold hearings to reevaluate the ban. Because of advances in screening, the American Red Cross recommends reducing the ban for men who had sex with another man to one year. If the ban is lifted, experts believe it will result in an additional 219,000 pints of blood a year, a 1.4% increase.

Obviously the gay community opposes the lifetime ban because they want to donate blood. And they aren't even looking for a free t-shirt.