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Blood Donation & Blood Transfusion during COVID-19 Pandemic

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The spread of COVID-19 has imperative effect on the number of blood donations



The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a highly contagious respiratory disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. WHO acknowledged the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 30 January and declared pandemic on 11 March 2020. By the mid of April 2020, over 20,00,000 cases have emerged worldwide, with a mortality rate as high as over 6% of total infected. If we consider the number of recovered cases and deaths only, around 21% have lost their lives.

The COVID-19, has created enormous anxiety, uncertainty, and disruption to our lives. Much has already been talked and debated about shortage of sanitizers, face masks, personal protection equipment (PPE), testing kits and testing labs but little has been said about life saving blood which is always in scarcity.

Blood transfusions are an integral part of major surgeries and many medical conditions. Elective surgeries may be postponed but diseases like thalassemia, sickle cell disease and some cancers where survival depends upon regular transfusions, drying of blood banks may endanger their existence. As a doctor who is involved in the management of blood disorders, I also go to the extent of advising high-end screening techniques like the Individual Donor Nucleic Acid Testing Technology (ID-NAT) to screen the donated blood for Transfusion Transmitted Infections such as HIV, Hepatitis B and C. This results in better prevention from transfusion transmitted infections.

The spread of COVID-19 has imperative effect on the number of blood donations, on blood supplies due to cessation of outdoor blood donation camps and reluctance of voluntary donors to donate blood at hospital blood banks due to fear of catching Covid 19 infection. The SARS-CoV-2 has a long incubation period of 1-14 days (average, 5-6 days & longest reported, 24 days). Its asymptomatic infection in a large number of individuals poses a huge challenge in the recruitment of blood donors, and bloodsafety.

Our nation's blood supply is essential to our health care security. In 2017-18 only 11.45 million units were collected against total requirement of 13.4 million units, approximately shortage of 2 million units. Blood donor organizations are encountering extra challenge in recruiting and retaining potential donors during Covid 19 lockdown period. Personal calls and popular social and messaging apps like Facebook & WhatsApp are implied to encourage the donors. The blood donors are invited to make an appointment to donate blood in slots to ensure appropriate social distancing.

There are serious concerns in the minds of blood donors when to donate and when not. Person with confirmed Coronavirus infection and who has been in isolation must not donate. However persons who have been in isolation for at least 14 days since the first day of isolation & resolution of any symptoms (if relevant) then, if the donor remains well with no symptoms of Coronavirus infection, the donation may be accepted.

If the donor has a history of contact with a confirmed case of Coronavirus infection and the donor has not been asked to isolate, he/she remain well with no symptoms of Coronavirus infection and agree to report any post donation illness, the donation may be accepted. Donors must be provided with information about contacting the blood service if they develop any illness after blood donation. It is only necessary to recall the donations from donors who report symptoms of Coronavirus infection if these symptoms start on or before the fifth day after donation. There is no evidence at present that coronaviruses can be transmitted by blood transfusion and therefore these measures are precautionary.

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), there have been no reported or suspected cases of transfusion-transmitted COVID-19. No cases of transfusion- transmission were ever reported for the other two coronaviruses that emerged during the past two decades (SARS and MERS-CoV).

Individuals are not at risk of contracting COVID-19 through the blood donation process or via a blood transfusion, since respiratory viruses are generally not known to be transmitted by donation or transfusion.

We appeal to the public to come forward to replenish the empty coffers of blood banks.

Dr. J.S. Arora, General Secretary of National Thalassemia Welfare Society and Federation of Indian Thalassemics