



# GIVE BLOOD & GET HEALTHIER

Fewer than 10% of us donate blood each year. If you've been sitting this one out, consider this: There's something in it for you, too.

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photographed by **LEVI BROWN**

You've got about 10 pints of precious blood doing laps around your circulatory system, but we're here to suggest that you lose one. Why? It's a boon for your well-being. The simple act of giving blood is one of the quickest and easiest ways to make a difference in the lives of others, but experts say that it also offers three nice health perks for the donor.

## 1 STRENGTHEN YOUR HEART

Giving blood is kindhearted and potentially good for your ticker. It all comes down to iron: When you take in too much (more than 18 mg a day for women under 50, or more than 8 mg for women 50 and older), the mineral can stack up in your blood. Your body dumps excess iron during the menstrual cycle, but it's possible for too much to accumulate

## Feeling Queasy?

If a fear of either blood or needles is stopping you from donating—or even wanting to read this article—hear us out before you flip the page. You just need to know how to work through that I'm-gonna-faint feeling. Some people's nervous systems overreact to stressful situations, such as being pricked. In response, their blood pressure and heart rate can suddenly dip and—*blergh*—they're feeling woozy. A technique called applied muscle tension, in which you contract and relax muscles, can help fight nausea by bumping blood pressure back up. Try it by tightening any large muscles, such as your thighs or abdominals (imagine you're doing a crunch) for 10 to 15 seconds, then releasing. Another tip: Even if you're not a needle-phobe, drink an extra 2 cups of water before the donation. When you're dehydrated, losing extra fluid in the form of blood can lead to fainting, especially if you're petite.

in postmenopausal women (as well as in middle-aged and older men). People with very high iron levels may have an elevated risk of cardiovascular disease and heart attacks. Experts aren't certain what causes the harm to the heart, but one theory is that an overload of iron can be toxic to the coronary arteries, says Jennifer Haythe, M.D., a cardiologist at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital. Donating could help lower elevated levels, possibly making for a healthier heart. Excess iron isn't a big problem for most people, and, of course, giving blood doesn't top the list of things you should do for your ticker. Tried-and-

PROP STYLING BY ANGELA CAMPOS @ BA-REPS.COM. ADDITIONAL SOURCES: MARK ETTENSOHN, PSY.D., LICENSED CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST, SACRAMENTO, CA; STEVEN GUNDY, M.D., CARDIOLOGIST, FOUNDER OF THE CENTER FOR RESTORATIVE MEDICINE, AND AUTHOR OF *DR. GUNDY'S DIET EVOLUTION*; ROSS HERRON, M.D., MEDICAL DIRECTOR, AMERICAN RED CROSS

true heart-healthy behaviors, such as staying active, watching your cholesterol, and eating a nutritious diet, are a must. But donating could give you an additional health boost. So why not?

## 2 CHECK A CHECKUP OFF YOUR LIST

This isn't an excuse to skip your annual exam (that's never Oz-OK), but giving blood does get you a bonus mini-physical—no copay needed. Before any blood is drawn, you'll have your vitals checked and immediately learn if the staff finds any issues (say, high blood pressure or low hemoglobin levels, which could indicate that you don't have enough iron in your blood to donate). Then, after you give blood, your sample will be tested for West Nile virus, hepatitis, and more, and you'll be notified if anything comes back positive.


## 3 WALK AWAY WITH A SMILE

If your schedule doesn't leave much time for volunteering, donating blood is a one-hour way to give back to your community. Every two seconds, someone in the U.S. requires blood, whether it's a premature baby in need of a transfusion or a cancer patient mid-treatment. "I had a bad car accident years back, and it took 38 units of blood to save my life," says Louis Katz, M.D., the chief medical officer at America's Blood Centers. "If all of those people hadn't donated in the weeks before my crash, I could have died." What's in it for you? Although they haven't looked at giving blood specifically, several studies indicate that regular volunteering is linked to health benefits, including a lower mortality rate. But Katz argues that the warm glow you get from giving blood is the best bonus—and is what keeps people coming back. "Donors wouldn't let us sit them down and stick a needle in their arm if they didn't walk away feeling great about what they'd done." Give blood, then give yourself a pat on the back. That donation will save as many as three people's lives.



### THE PLAY-BY-PLAY

Track how your body replenishes that pint of blood you donate.







#### POKE!

As soon as the blood draw begins , your red and white blood cell counts start to drop ↓. This sends a signal  to special cells in the kidneys to secrete a hormone (erythropoietin) into the bloodstream.

#### SEE YA

This hormone travels to your bone marrow , where it kick-starts the production of new cells. You'll need 'em: By the end of the blood draw, you will have lost trillions of red cells and billions of white cells .

#### WORK IT

Your bone marrow churns out about **2 million red**  and **115,000 white**  blood cells every second (pew!), so within a few days or weeks, your levels will be back to normal . If you have low iron stores, this process may take a little longer, since your body depends on the mineral to replace the red blood cells in particular. Plasma—the fluid  part of your blood—is replenished much more quickly. As long as you stay properly hydrated, you'll be topped back up within a few hours , says Katz, which is why you should swig that juice  before leaving the donation center.

### Can You Donate?

Most people are eligible to give blood, but if you can check off anything on this list, you may not be allowed:

- ☐ Your top blood pressure number (systolic) is 180 or higher or lower than 90, or bottom number (diastolic) is 100 or higher or lower than 50.
- ☐ You're taking antibiotics for an infection.
- ☐ You have a temperature above 99.5 degrees.
- ☐ You're pregnant. (You will need to wait six weeks after giving birth.)
- ☐ You weigh less than 110 pounds.
- ☐ You don't feel well the day of donation or have a cough that's bringing up phlegm.
- ☐ You've traveled to or lived in certain foreign countries, such as those that have a high risk of malaria or mad cow disease.
- ☐ You've donated blood within the last eight weeks.