



Breaking it Down: Understanding New Blood Donation Criteria for 2S/LGBTQIA+ People

Breaking Down the “Blood Ban” Changes

Canada’s blood donation criteria has changed in ways that directly impact us as 2S/LGBTQIA+ people. Here’s what you should know.

For years, many 2S/LGBTQIA+ people have been excluded from donating blood because of a discriminatory and outdated policy from Canadian Blood Services (CBS).

Fortunately, after decades of advocacy from 2S/LGBTQIA+ activists and researchers, CBS established a gender-neutral and behaviour-based approach for screening blood donations. In September 2022, they adopted a new “donor screening questionnaire” – the questions they ask donors to determine if they can or cannot donate. The current questionnaire and approaches used are more inclusive, meaning more 2S/LGBTQIA+ people are able to donate today since the “blood ban” was first instituted in 1992.

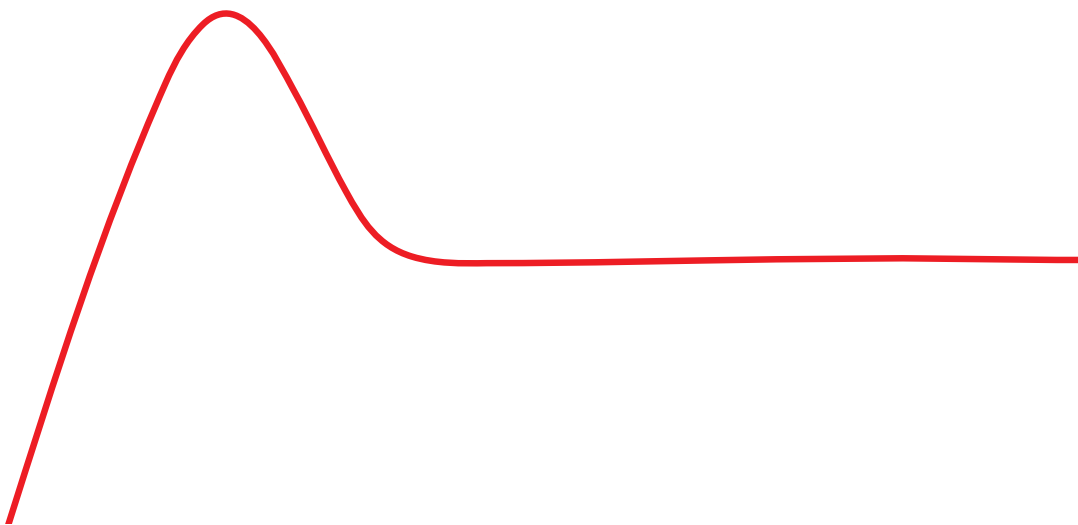
However, there are still important limitations on who can donate and when, with many of these rules impacting 2S/LGBTQIA+ people in particular. Here’s what you need to know about the rules as they are today.

Why do they ask questions at all? Don’t they test the blood anyways?

Yes, all donated blood is carefully tested for potential infections. But there are limitations. The limitation that matters most here is the concept of “**window periods**.”

When a bacterial or viral infection is first passed on, or “transmitted,” it takes time to replicate in the body before it can be reliably detected by the available tests. As such, a too-early test can result in a false negative. The time between when a virus is transmitted and when a test can reliably detect it is called a window period.

That’s why, in addition to testing all donated blood, all donors are asked questions to determine if we could be in a window period – where a test could say we’re negative for something like HIV or Hepatitis C – but actually, we’re positive and enough time hasn’t passed for the test to detect the virus.



Understanding risk when it comes to blood donation policy

CBS determines much of its deferral criteria based on a three-month window period, which is based on the test which has the longest window period (Hepatitis B), and extending this by a few weeks. This is done to make sure that the tests used to screen blood detect as close to 100% as possible, in the event of a recent infection.

This is a significant change from the multi-year, and at one point *lifetime*, ban that men who have sex with men in our community once faced. Still, given advances in HIV testing technology, it's understandable why some queer people may be confused as to why CBS still uses a three-month deferral period.

For instance, the testing used for donated blood can detect HIV at 95% certainty in about 7 to 10 days, and approaches 99% within a few weeks. However, given the longer window period for other infections (e.g. Hepatitis B and C), CBS still takes a conservative approach to risk by maintaining a three-month window period.

As the operator of Canada's blood supply, CBS has a critical responsibility in maintaining the safety of the blood supply and therefore needs to be extremely risk-averse. But to avoid unnecessary deferrals, which limit potential donations and reinforces stigma around HIV and sex, deferral criteria should continue to be reviewed and revised based on current evidence that takes into account advances in medicine, science, and technology.



So what's new about the donation criteria?

Before the 2022 changes, identity-based questions effectively banned many or most sexually active gay, bi, and queer men, as well as many other 2S/LGBTQIA+ people from donating for unreasonable lengths of time.

The new policy asks the same questions to all donors, recognizing that HIV, Hepatitis C, and other infections can be passed on through sex. If a donor's recent sexual history carries risk for HIV (or other infections) and they're potentially in the window period, their donation is deferred as a precautionary measure – regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

This is a good thing for our community – allowing more 2S/LGBTQIA+ people to donate blood and eliminating the previous policy which singled-out and stigmatized gay, bi, and queer men in particular, all while making our blood donation system safer in the process.

Despite this change, it's important to recognize that there are many people who still won't be able to donate blood. This includes people taking PrEP, people with multiple partners and who have anal sex with one or more of their partners, as well as people who have sex with someone living with HIV. Given that these criteria impact the ability of many 2S/LGBTQIA+ people to donate, more work is needed to review these deferral criteria.



What are the limitations to donating blood in the new criteria?

Anal sex & non-monogamy

Because there is a higher risk for HIV and Hepatitis C to be transmitted through anal sex compared to vaginal/front hole or oral sex, you'll be asked if you've had anal sex with a new or multiple partners in the last three months. If you have, you'll be asked to defer your donation until **three months after the last time you had anal sex**. This applies even if you've used condoms.

If you've had anal sex with the same sexual partner for at least three months – or have not had anal sex and have had multiple sexual partners in the last three months – you will be able to **proceed with the donation process**.

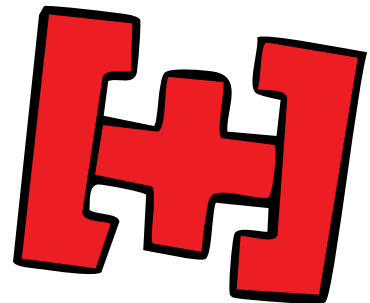
However, if you've had anal sex and have had multiple sex partners in the last three months, even if they've been regular or ongoing partners, you are **not able to donate blood at this time** (until it has been three months since you have had anal sex with only one partner or no sex partner). The criteria does not differentiate between multiple new partners or multiple partners that are not new.



Sex with an HIV-positive partner

People who have had sex with someone living with HIV are not eligible to donate for **12 months since the last sexual contact**, even if that partner's HIV status is undetectable (meaning they are HIV-positive but on effective HIV treatment and can't pass on the virus through sex). This is understandably frustrating because there is no way a partner could transmit HIV sexually if they are undetectable.

As well, someone living with HIV is not able to donate – even if they are undetectable. While we can be confident that undetectable means untransmittable through sex, this doesn't apply to donated blood. The risks of transmission through blood transfusion are very different.



PrEP use

PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), is the most effective way of preventing HIV through sex, and is widely used by many 2S/LGBTQIA+ people as part of their sexual health and wellbeing strategy. This should be celebrated, and we should continue efforts to get more people who would benefit from PrEP on the medication.

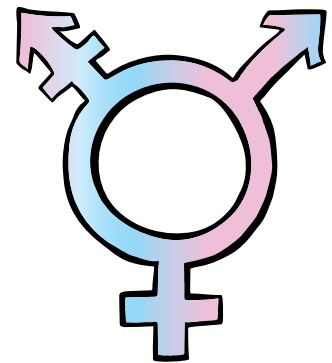
However, people who take oral pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) or post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) must wait **four months since their last dose to donate**, while people on long-acting injectable PrEP must wait **two years since their last dose**. The primary concern is that these antiretroviral medications may affect the ability of the screening tests used to detect HIV, however work with external experts in HIV testing is underway to better understand this issue and determine how to minimize the deferral period for people on PrEP.



Trans and gender-diverse people

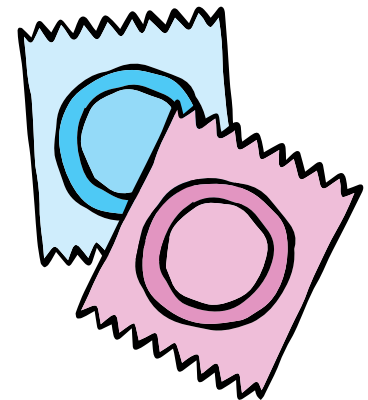
Trans donors with a binary gender (male/female) are now able to register based on their gender. Invasive questions, such as those about gender-affirming lower genitalia surgery, are no longer asked during the screening process. However, due to limitations of the binary registration computer software system, non-binary donors are still required to register in a binary gender.

In addition, the current system requires use of legal names, matched with government IDs, which can increase the possibility of deadnaming. CBS is working in consultation with trans- and gender diverse communities to develop a more affirming, inclusive, and safe screening process for trans and gender diverse people.



Sex work

As of October 2022, there is no longer a lifelong deferral in place for sex work. While a positive step, if you engage in sex work you must still wait **12 months since the last sexual contact** to donate – another criteria we believe should be updated.



It sounds like we're still very limited when it comes to donating blood

It can certainly be frustrating that these changes, while they make the donation process for screening more equal and inclusive, still limit many people in our community from donating. Community advocates and researchers have done decades of work to educate our community about HIV. We understand that window periods for some infections put a limitation on how permissive criteria can be, but at the same time so many of us are acutely aware of our health and status when it comes to HIV and Hep C. We've spent years taking care of ourselves and each other, and the policies should keep up with our work.

In the meantime, let's take stock of the progress made, and the opportunity for more 2S/LGBTQIA+ people to be able to donate as a result of CBS' new screening policy. As we celebrate the ability for more 2S/LGBTQIA+ people to donate, we'll continue to work in collaboration with other 2S/LGBTQIA+ community organizations, and researchers to ensure that their policies including deferral criteria are further improved.

[Visit here for a complete list of CBS eligibility requirements.](#)

[Visit here to find all CBS donation centre locations and hours.](#)

[Visit here to begin the donation process and book your appointment.](#)

In Quebec, blood donation is handled by [Héma-Québec](#), a separate organization that has its own donation criteria. They are also regulated by Health Canada.



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