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Do blood donation centers sell your blood?

Janet Nguyen

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A phlebotomist prepares to draw blood from a donor at a blood donation center in San Francisco, California. Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

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This is just one of the stories from our “I’ve Always Wondered” series, where we tackle all of your questions about the world of business, no matter how big or small. Ever wondered if recycling is [worth it](#)? Or how store brands [stack up against](#) name brands? Check out more from the series [here](#).

Listener Curt Beck from Pensacola, Florida, asks:

I donate blood as often as I can, and I receive a T-shirt and maybe a few bucks in a gift card. What happens after that? I know blood centers put a lot of effort into obtaining and maintaining the blood so it is usable, but I also imagine the blood is sold for a lot of money.

January is National Blood Donor Month and, not coincidentally, a time when donations tend to ebb. Every two seconds, someone in the U.S. [needs blood for serious injuries](#), childbirth, cancer treatments and more, according to the Department of Health and Human Services.

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Bad weather and illnesses like the flu, RSV and COVID-19 in the winter fuel the decline in donations. During the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic, blood donations reached record lows, leading the American Red Cross to declare its [“first-ever blood crisis.”](#)

When you donate blood, it’s subjected to rigorous testing for infectious diseases like HIV and Hepatitis B and C, and quickly separated into red blood cells, plasma and platelets. Blood centers also have to follow strict storage and refrigeration requirements, according to the blood centers Marketplace spoke to.

This entire process, which ensures that patients receive safe blood, is labor-intensive. And it doesn't come cheap. Blood donation centers sell your blood to hospitals to recoup costs related to labor, testing, supplies, equipment and other expenses, blood centers told Marketplace. However, if centers paid donors, that might incentivize them to lie about any risk factors that would make their blood unsafe.

A typical platelet unit costs between \$600 and \$700, 350 milliliters of red blood cells typically cost \$250, and between 250 and 275 milliliters of plasma costs between \$60 and \$80, said Jed Gorlin, chief medical officer at America's Blood Centers, an association of independent, nonprofit blood centers.

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"Virtually all blood centers in the United States are nonprofit organizations, meaning that we exist to serve the community. We don't exist to make money for our shareholders," Gorlin said.

But centers can still charge enough to earn some profit.

"Most blood centers operate at about a 3% margin because we still have to pay the light bill and we still have to put gas in the cars," said Kim Kinsell, CEO of LifeSouth Community Blood Centers, a nonprofit community blood bank that serves hospitals in Alabama, Florida, Georgia and Tennessee.

Doctors [transfuse patients with](#) red blood cells, which carry oxygen to different parts of the body, if they've lost blood due to trauma or surgery. They administer platelets to patients with cancer or those who are having major surgery in order to help their blood clot. And they give plasma to patients dealing with emergency and trauma situations in order to prevent bleeding, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Patients have to pay [a median of \\$634 per unit of red blood cells](#), and a median of \$2,388 per each red blood cell transfusion procedure, according to a 2023 paper published in the American Journal of Hematology.

Hospitals need blood donation centers, otherwise their blood supply wouldn't be enough or they'd risk their blood becoming outdated, Gorlin said. Red blood cells last 42 days, plasma can be frozen

and stored for up to a year and platelets only last five to seven days, Gorlin explained.

The largest cost for blood centers is labor, which accounts for 45% to 50% of LifeSouth's expenses, Kinsell said. Blood centers [hire phlebotomists](#), who draw your blood and prepare it for testing. The median pay for a phlebotomist in the U.S. stood at [about \\$42,000 in 2023](#), according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Blood centers also have to hire medical directors and nurses, Kinsell said.

Supplies, like blood bags, account for 20% to 25% of LifeSouth's expenses, while testing makes up 8% to 12%. Equipment, marketing and recruitment expenses account for the remaining costs.

LifeSouth is always looking for more blood donors, especially since blood centers have to deal with unpredictable events, Kinsell said.

Centers might shut down in response to an adverse weather event, hampering the blood supply. Or hospitals might have to use up a large amount of their blood supply to help victims of terrorist attacks or catastrophic roadway accidents, Kinsell said.

"There are good days, but I would say there are just as many bad days, and for reasons that we can't control or foresee. We can't foresee the large traffic accidents. We can't foresee the acts of terrorism. We cannot foresee the weather," Kinsell said.

It's better to ask people to donate blood instead of paying them, because if there are financial incentives, they are more likely to give untrue answers on donation questionnaires, said Anna Nagurney, professor of operations management at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

There were major blood shortages during the thick of the COVID-19 crisis, Nagurney said. During the early years of the pandemic, the supply [hit a 10-year low](#).

Younger donors haven't donated as much since the pandemic, which Nagurney thinks is because it's not as convenient anymore. Many collection sites have shut down, she added, while blood drives at universities and companies have declined.

"I think it's very important that people realize the criticality of donating, if they can, if they're up to it," Nagurney said. "This is something that can make a big difference in people's lives."

Tell us what you've always wondered:

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