

What is the Waiting List?

How Does it Work?

All patients waiting for a transplant in the United States have equal access to donated organs. The United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS) manages a computerized network for impartially matching organ donors with potential transplant recipients. Every potential recipient waiting for an organ transplant is listed with UNOS. Transplant centers and organ recovery organizations across the country are part of this national Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network.

In each case, a thorough medical and social history of the donor is completed. LifeSource inputs medical information about the organ donor into the computer, which generates a computerized match list.

This list gives names of potential transplant recipients in order of priority. Matching priority is based upon criteria such as the severity of the patient's illness, length of time waiting for the transplant, blood type, and size of organ. Genetic tissue matching is a key factor for kidney and pancreas transplants, where a match is critical in minimizing the risk of organ rejection.

LifeSource contacts the transplant surgeon caring for the first patient on the list to offer the organ. Laboratory tests designed to measure the compatibility between the donor organ and recipient are necessary for some transplants. A surgeon will not accept the organ if these tests show that the patient's immune system will reject it. If the organ is turned down, the next center on the potential recipient list is contacted, and so on until the organ is placed. Once the organ is accepted for a patient, transportation arrangements are made and transplantation surgery is scheduled.

Transplant waiting times can vary from a few months to years. While more than 100,000 Americans wait for a transplant, only about 25,000 receive transplants each year. Approximately eighteen people die each day because there are not enough organs for everyone who needs a transplant.