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BY SYLVIA KATUSHABE

Are you eligible to donate blood?

As schools prepare to break for holidays, health professionals are warning of a likely drop in blood donations, as students remain the country's largest donor group during term time.

Mr Brian Kasozi, the coordinator for e-blood donor recruitment at the Uganda Red Cross Society, says blood collection rises when schools are open but declines sharply during holidays.

"When we look at our collections, we usually collect more blood when students are in school because most of our donors are students. The months we experience scarcity are when they go home," Mr Kasozi says.

He adds that large school drives can yield hundreds of units in a short time, but the numbers fall during long holidays, particularly between November and January.

Eligibility and safety

Mr Kasozi explains that strict requirements are followed to protect both donors and recipients. Eligible donors must be aged between 17 and 60 years, weigh at least 50kgs, and be in good health. Regular donors may be accepted up to 65 years.

People with chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, asthma, sickle cell disease, HIV or hepatitis are not eligible to donate. Donors should also not be on medication at the time of giving blood.

"All donated blood is screened for infections such as HIV, hepatitis B and C, and syphilis. If any of these are detected, the blood is not used," he said.

Men can donate every three months, while women are advised to donate



A healthcare specialist from Uganda Red Cross Society prepares a woman for a blood donation at Victoria University last week. PHOTO/SYLVIA KATUSHABE

every four months.

Dr Lawrence Muganga (PhD), Vice Chancellor of Victoria University and a regular donor, urges Ugandans to treat blood donation as a civic duty.

"We see many accidents and illnesses that require urgent blood transfusions. Donating blood is one of the simplest ways to save lives," he says.

Speaking during a blood donation drive organised by his sister, Ms Hellen Batumuliza, in memory of their late mother, Dr Muganga reveals he has donated blood 40 times.

Ms Batumuliza encourages individuals to take personal initiative in supporting such efforts. "Blood is not manufactured;

We are all in it
 "This [blood donation] is not just a responsibility for government or the Red Cross. It is about all of us. Today it may be someone else in need; tomorrow it could be your loved one," **Brian Kasozi, coordinator, e-blood donor recruitment at the Uganda Red Cross Society**

it is given freely. You never know when you or your loved ones need it," she says.

Nutrition and preparation

Nutritionists emphasise that proper

diet is essential before and after donation. Mr Benard Bwambale says donors must have sufficient blood levels before giving.

"You cannot donate when your body is already struggling. That is why screening is done beforehand," he says.

He explains that although only a controlled amount of blood is collected, donation reduces iron levels, making diet a key consideration.

Prospective donors are advised to eat iron-rich foods such as meat, liver, poultry and fish, as well as plant-based options such as beans, spinach and chickpeas to support red blood cell production.

Vitamin C is equally important for iron absorption. Fruits such as oranges, mangoes and other citrus varieties help the body utilise iron effectively.

Hydration is also critical. Donors are encouraged to drink plenty of water and fruit juice before and after donation. Caffeine and alcohol should be avoided for at least a week prior to donation to prevent dehydration.

Closing the gap

Uganda collects about 80 percent of its required blood supply, leaving a shortfall of 20 percent.

According to World Health Organisation guidelines, a country should collect blood units equivalent to at least one percent of its population annually—about 459,000 units for Uganda.

"This gap represents lives lost—mothers during childbirth, accident victims, and patients with conditions such as sickle cell disease," Mr Kasozi says.

He stresses that blood cannot be manufactured and relies entirely on donors.

"When you donate, you save lives. There is no substitute for human blood."

Donors also benefit from free health screening, as each donor is tested for major infections. Additionally, the body replenishes lost blood cells, which can support overall immune function.

Mr Kasozi urges Ugandans to donate regularly, whether through organised drives or by visiting blood banks and collection centres.

Blood donation in Uganda is often driven by corporate and institutional initiatives, but experts emphasise that it should not be limited to organised campaigns.

Individuals can walk into blood banks or Uganda Blood Transfusion Service centres at any time to donate.

The country has an established network of donation facilities, including regional blood banks in Arua, Gulu, Fort Portal, Masaka, Mbale, Mbarara and Nakasero, as well as several blood collection centres across the country.

Health officials say sustained public participation—beyond school drives and corporate campaigns—is essential to ensuring a stable blood supply throughout the year.

CORRECTION

At least Shs10.2 trillion was allocated to governance and security, while