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Selling plasma: Fattens my wallet, but what about my health? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I am going through my freshman year at college, and I came across a great way to help fund myself: selling plasma. I've been selling my plasma for almost five months now and have been getting mixed messages from many people. My mother insists losing so much of my plasma is why I've gained so much weight (which I feel is just the freshman 15). Others have told me that it can help later in life because the fluids put back into you thin out your blood, and therefore lower your risk of heart problems. I am confused and in need of the money. Are there any bad long-term side effects of selling plasma? Are there any good side effects?

Sincerely,
Poor thin-blooded student

Answer

Dear Poor thin-blooded student,

Donating a part of your body might sound alarming to some folks, especially to those who care a great deal about you. However, donating plasma (and receiving money in return, depending on where you donate) is considered a safe practice that not only helps your thin wallet, but also helps save lives of those in need. For those who donate, there are a number of regulations in place that help keep it safe. As far as side effects are concerned, there are some reported short-term side effects, but there isn't any noted association between plasma donation and weight gain. Interestingly though, there is some evidence to suggest that some people may benefit from plasma donation (more on that in a bit). And, while investigating the long-term health impacts is a subject of current research, not enough is currently known about what to expect as a result of donation over a longer period of time. Keep reading for more on plasma donation and its health impacts to help inform any decisions about future donations.

Before diving in, what is plasma anyway? Plasma is the liquid component (mostly water, in fact) of your blood that contains vital proteins, salts, and hormones (among others). It provides the suspension that allows red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets to flow about the body. As

mentioned earlier, plasma donation — whether it's for money or out of generosity — is currently considered a safe practice. That said, there are few negative side effects that you may experience at the time of donation. These include dizziness, nausea, loss of consciousness, and tingling in extremities or around the mouth. Donation centers can typically screen out people who are likely to experience these side effects, which means folks who pass the initial screening process may not experience them.

While the short-term side effects are more readily identifiable, research behind potential long-term changes to the health of frequent donors is still emerging. Currently, one issue some researchers are concerned about is the effect of citrate on the body's blood calcium levels. Citrate is used during plasma donation and typically prevents clotting by binding to calcium ions in your blood. As it binds to calcium ions, there's less calcium circulating in the blood, which can cause tingling, pain, or bone issues. Despite this one concern, people generally report that they stop donating plasma because of nonmedical reasons or medical reasons that are unrelated to plasma donation, as opposed to reasons related to adverse effects of plasma donation.

Although this might sound like good news for your body and your wallet, donating and receiving money for plasma is still considered a thorny issue by some. Because of this, there are differences in how donation centers operate. For instance, the [American Red Cross](#) [2] and other similar non-profit organizations don't pay donors for plasma and have a low limit on how often people can donate. On the other hand, places that do accept plasma in exchange for money are likely private, for-profit businesses that may each have its own rules.

Donation centers may differ on how they operate but there are certain criteria, determined by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which every donor must meet regardless of location or organization. For every donation, the amount of plasma removed from each donor is based on the person's weight (the minimum being 110 pounds), ranging from 625 to 800 milliliters (mL). Generally, the body is able to regenerate the lost plasma volume within a short amount of time. To give the body some time to recover, the FDA recommends that people limit their donation rate to every 48 hours, or twice a week, and no more than 110 donations per year. Even though plasma volume rebounds, frequent donors may want to have their blood regularly monitored for levels of immunoglobulin, albumin, globulin, and total serum protein. To do this, you can ask the staff at the donation center every four months or every 15 sessions to check your blood to make sure that it's safe for you to continue giving.

As far as positive health effects are concerned, people who have certain health conditions — but are otherwise healthy — may benefit from donating plasma. Research has found some evidence to suggest that people who have [hypertension](#) [3] and elevated [cholesterol levels](#) [4] saw lower blood pressure, and [total and LDL cholesterol](#) [5] levels (respectively) after they donated plasma within the FDA-recommended frequency. However, these health effects were not seen among donors without hypertension or elevated cholesterol levels.

With limited research on the long-term health effects of donating plasma, it may be wise to talk with a medical professional about your concerns. In addition, it might be wise to take a break from donating for a while if you're starting to feel more tired than usual on a regular basis. If this happens, it could be helpful to consider other ways you might be able to earn some cash without a toll on your body. Lastly, speaking with your health care provider or a registered dietitian could

help inform healthy weight maintenance if the weight gain you mentioned is something you'd like to explore further. For some additional homework, you can also check out [First-year fifteen — Can it be avoided?](#) [6] and get tips on maintaining healthy habits in the first year of college.

Here's to continuing your quest for knowledge, both academically and personally!

Alice!

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Published date:

Sep 29, 2006

Last reviewed on:

Feb 24, 2017

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