

Vitalant, Allegheny Health Network and UPMC Launch Plasma Donation Program to Help COVID-19 Patients

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Vitalant to collect convalescent plasma from recovered COVID-19 patients to be used in the treatment of those currently infected with the virus

PITTSBURGH (Apr. 13, 2020) – Vitalant (formerly Central Blood Bank) is partnering with Allegheny Health Network and UPMC on a pilot program to treat patients with active, severe cases of COVID-19 with blood plasma donated by people who have recovered from the disease. Known as “convalescent plasma,” this plasma contains antibodies that may give patients an extra boost to fight their illness.

Currently, there are no vaccines or proven treatments for COVID-19 because the virus is so new. Although trials for a vaccine are underway, it is expected to be many months before one is approved. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has identified and approved convalescent plasma treatment as an “emergency investigational new drug.” It’s currently the only antibody treatment available to COVID-19 patients and, as such, is a promising new therapy.

Both AHN and UPMC have obtained FDA clearance to transfuse convalescent plasma to patients who are suffering from COVID-19. Once donor eligibility is confirmed, Vitalant will work with both AHN and UPMC to collect and process the plasma.

To be eligible to donate convalescent plasma, donors will be screened and must have:

- prior diagnosis of COVID-19, documented by a laboratory test
- complete resolution of symptoms for at least 21 days to ensure full recovery
- a current negative test result for COVID-19
- all other donor eligibility for an automated plasma donation

Those who want to donate plasma are encouraged to apply through the Vitalant website ([Vitalant.org/covidfree](https://www.vitalant.org/covidfree)), or email AHN at c2p3@ahn.org or UPMC at c2p3@upmc.edu directly to be screened.

Donors will not be able to donate without a test demonstrating they are currently COVID-negative.

Vitalant will accept only donors who meet all FDA-required donor eligibility criteria and who have recovered from COVID-19 after they have been evaluated and cleared by a physician.

“At AHN, our pandemic response team closely monitors the dozens of potential therapeutics that are being investigated for the management of COVID-19,” said Tom Walsh, MD, infectious disease specialist and Medical Director, AHN Antimicrobial Stewardship Program. “We are extremely pleased to participate in this effort which brings a promising investigational treatment to hospitalized patients in our region who are battling severe COVID-19 infections.”

Dr. Darrell Triulzi, Professor of Pathology at the University of Pittsburgh, Director of the Division of Transfusion Medicine, and Medical Director of Vitalant Clinical Services stated, "With the help of the FDA, convalescent plasma represents one of the initial available therapies to patient's with COVID-19 infection. The rapid mobilization of the physicians caring for the patients, the hospital laboratories, and the region's blood provider Vitalant to create a convalescent plasma program is historically unparalleled and has positioned our community to be among the first to offer this therapy."

“It is a true testament to Pittsburgh’s spirit of helping our neighbors that altruistic donors have already stepped up to give their plasma to help our hospitalized patients,” said John McDyer, M.D., principal investigator at UPMC for the convalescent plasma trial and director of UPMC’s Lung Transplantation Translational Research Program. “We’re excited to enroll COVID-19 patients in our hospitals very soon and are part of the national effort to collect data on whether and how giving convalescent plasma from COVID-19 survivors helps in the treatment of patients who are sick with COVID-19.

Dr. Joseph Kiss, Medical Director of Clinical Apheresis and Blood Services at Vitalant, agrees. “At this critical moment in the pandemic it is truly remarkable to see physicians, hospitals, laboratories, our blood bank -- and the very patients who recovered -- working together on this new therapy.”