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# Red Cross for Critica

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## Key Takeaways

Black patients have unique antigens on their red blood cells not commonly found in other populations, making it more difficult to find compatible blood for those in need of a transfusion.

Sickle cell disease primarily affects Black Americans and requires multiple blood transfusions over a lifetime.

Black Americans face multiple barriers to becoming blood donors.

of complications if infected with COVID-19, donations are still needed as the pandemic stretches into the fall. <sup>[1]</sup>

While Black Americans make up 13.4% of the population, <sup>[2]</sup> [Yvette Miller, MD](#), executive medical director for the American Red Cross, says that only 4% to 5% of American Red Cross blood donors are Black. She tells Verywell that COVID-19 lockdowns, social distancing, and over-worked medical facilities have only exacerbated the existing barriers keeping Black individuals from donating blood.

## Why Is There a Need For Black Blood Donors?

Racial groups can have different likelihoods of rare blood types. According to the Red Cross, U-negative and Duffy-negative blood types are more prevalent Black community. <sup>[3]</sup> Black patients with sickle cell disease who have these blood types can only receive blood from matching donors. This can make it difficult to find compatible blood for a Black patient from a non-Black donor.

“Some of our antigens are very different from the antigen mix on the red blood cells of Caucasians,” Miller, who is Black, tells Verywell. Antigens are markers on the surface of red blood cells that determine

Black Americans are more prone to sickle cell disease than others.

There's a steady need from sickle cell disease patients for blood donations despite a sharp decline in donations across the board. <sup>[4]</sup>

## What Is Sickle Cell Disease?

Approximately 1 in 365 Black Americans will be diagnosed with sickle cell disease, a condition that causes red blood cells to break down. <sup>[5]</sup>

Treatment for the disease includes frequent red blood cell transfusions to replace the abnormal sickle-shaped red blood cells that die prematurely, causing anemia.

Another treatment option for patients with sickle cell disease is red blood cell exchange apheresis. <sup>[6]</sup> In this procedure, the patient's blood is removed through an IV line and circulated through a machine. The patient's diseased red blood cells are then discarded and replaced with healthy donor red blood cells.

**Related:** [12 Things You Should Know About Sickle Cell Disease](#)

Over time, patients who require frequent blood transfusions may develop antibodies to donor blood they have received, making it increasingly difficult to find a matching donor in the future.



### What This Means For You

## Barriers to Blood Donation in Black Communities

A decline in Black blood donors can be attributed to the many barriers people in Black communities face when seeking to donate.

### COVID-19

COVID-19 is negatively impacting the number of available Black blood donors. Not only is exposure risk deterring potential donors, but because of social distancing requirements, a lack of space limits the number of donation sites or spots that can be made available for blood drives.

“There are fewer donors available,” Miller says. “At the start of the pandemic, we had 4,000 to 5,000 Black donors a week. That dropped 60% from early March to mid-April due to shelter in place orders and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the Black community.”

meeting their basic needs supersedes their desire to donate.”

— YVETTE MILLER, MD

## Socio-economic Barriers

Fewer Black individuals are able to work remotely or take time off of work to donate, Miller says.

There is also a lack of access to blood collection sites in communities of color. Miller adds that many Black Americans rely on public transportation, which may not align with the location of many donation sites.

“I believe that Black Americans want to donate just as much as anybody else,” she says. “But meeting their basic needs supersedes their desire to donate.”

## Misconceptions About Donating

[Daniel B. Fagbuyi, MD](#), an emergency physician for MedStar Health in Columbia, Maryland, cites mistrust of healthcare professionals and misconceptions about blood donation—like the myth that donating

“[People] may feel that they may get an infection just from having a needle stuck in their arm,” Fagbuyi, who was also an Obama administration public health/biodefense appointee, tells Verywell. “We need to demystify blood donation in Black and Latinx communities.”

It is safe to donate blood. New sterile needles and sterilized equipment are used on each donor, and there is no risk of contracting blood-related infections.

## Physiological Factors

Miller says that many Black individuals are not eligible to donate blood due to physiological factors they are unable to control, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, and uncontrolled diabetes.

“There are upper limits for donor blood pressure, they can not have significant cardiac disease or palpitations, and diabetes must be under control,” she says.

Black Americans tend to have lower hemoglobin levels than other populations, Miller adds, which must be at a certain level in order to safely donate.

be on the lower end.” <sup>[7]</sup>

## How Can Black Communities Encourage More Blood Donations?

Fagbuyi emphasizes that encouragement to donate blood needs to come from Black thought leaders, influencers, barbershop owners, radio hosts, public figures, and interviews with Black physicians.

“It’s not just the message,” Fagbuyi says. “Who is the messenger? What’s the credibility of the messenger? Are they relatable?”

Miller says the Red Cross employs this method by reaching out to churches and trusted pastors in Black communities.

“The church holds a very special place in the Black community,” she says. “When we have done outreach to the clergy and to churches, we have been very successful. Getting the pastor and elders in the church who is a blood donor and who church members respect is such a powerful influence on the church members.”

Miller also says that Black Greek collegiate organizations, such as the core members of the [Divine 9](#)—a group of Black fraternities and sororities—are helpful in encouraging blood donations. Members of the community are encouraged to volunteer to support and organize blood



absolutely do encourage Black people who are healthy and well to go to a blood supplier and donate blood,” Miller says. “Supporting our community members is our responsibility. This is a health need that our community needs to step up and meet.”

7 Sources 



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Cyra-Lea, BSN, RN, is a writer and nurse specializing in heart health and cardiac care.

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