Special Blood Requirement – Red Blood Cell (RBC) Antibodies

What are RBC antibodies?

When you are exposed to another person's RBCs through a blood transfusion or pregnancy, sometimes your immune system will form an antibody to these RBCs.

Antibodies are usually formed by the body as part of its normal defense system. For example, your body will develop antibodies to bacteria or viruses which then help to fight infection. In this case, your body recognized a protein (also called an antigen) on the donor's or (in the case of pregnancy) the baby's RBCs that was different from yours and you formed an antibody against it.

Does everyone who receives a blood transfusion form an antibody?

Only a small percentage of people (about 7 out of every 100) who have been pregnant or transfused will form an antibody. Patients who have had many blood transfusions or multiple pregnancies may be more likely to form an antibody.

How does it affect me?

If you receive a blood transfusion that is not matched for the antibody you have, there is a risk that it will not provide the maximum benefit and may even lead to a transfusion reaction.

Depending on the type of antibody you have, it may take more time to find blood that is a match for you. It is important to let your physician know about this antibody as soon as possible if a blood transfusion is being considered for you.

If you are pregnant, your antibody can pass from your blood to your baby through the placenta. If the baby's RBCs are not a match with the antibody, your physician will monitor you and your baby carefully throughout your pregnancy in case you need special care.

- ✓ Please carry the attached card with you and show it to your physician or nurse if a blood transfusion is being considered and/or if you are pregnant.

- ✓ Consider registering with a medical alert program (such as MedicAlert® or an equivalent program) that will identify your need for blood matched to the antibody identified in your blood to first responders and physicians in case of emergencies

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Ontario Regional Blood Coordinating Network