

Social Work Services

For UW Medicine lung transplant patients

This chapter explains how the UW Medicine Lung Transplant Social Worker can support you during all stages of the transplant process.

A lung transplant may help you have a better quality of life and even allow you to live longer. But you, your family, and your care providers will deal with many challenges before and after your transplant surgery. A social worker can be of help with many of the issues you will face.

What does a social worker do?

The Lung Transplant Social Worker is a vital member of the UW Medicine Lung Transplant Team. The social worker can help you, your family, and your care providers cope with stress and resolve many of the issues that arise during the transplant process.



The Lung Transplant Social Worker is here to support you, your family, and your care providers.

Assessment

Patients, their families, and their care providers will meet with the Lung Transplant Social Worker during the first part of their evaluation. During your visit, the social worker will ask many questions about your situation. Your answers will help us know what help you might need as you prepare for a possible lung transplant. The social worker will also explain what the Lung Transplant Team needs from you and your care providers.

You may meet with the social worker more than one time. It may take weeks or months before the assessment is complete.

Support Group

The Lung Transplant Social Worker leads the UW Medicine Lung Transplant Support Group. Patients may attend support group meetings before and after their transplant surgery. Most times, these meetings are an “open forum” where everyone can share and ask questions.

These meetings are a great place to meet other lung transplant patients and their care providers. It can be helpful to connect with others who are going through an experience that is similar to yours.

Counseling and Referrals

The Lung Transplant Social Worker will talk with you about the lifestyle changes, reactions, and stresses that you will face before and after your transplant. If needed, the social worker can provide brief counseling. They may also refer you to agencies, community resources, or a mental health provider to help you cope with these challenges.

Resources

The Lung Transplant Social Worker can provide resources that explain the *psychosocial* (emotional, mental, or social) aspects of transplant. These resources include books from our lending library and other written materials. Some of these materials are about the transplant process, while others deal with more general subjects.

Coping After a Transplant

A transplant is a major event. It changes the lives of the patient, their family, and their care providers. The first few months after a lung transplant require a full commitment from everyone involved.

All Lung Transplant Team members, including the social worker, provide ongoing support and teaching for you and your care providers. Some of this occurs at clinic visits before the transplant. But we continue to support and teach you in the hospital after your transplant surgery, and at each clinic visit after you leave the hospital. Many patients and their care providers also find it helpful to attend the monthly Lung Transplant Support Group meetings at UWMC.

Work

Disability

Some patients can keep working while they wait for a lung transplant. Other patients qualify for Social Security Disability (SSD) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits.

At some point after a lung transplant surgery, recipients may no longer be considered disabled. The legal definition of “disability” under the SSD and SSI programs is:

“The inability to engage in any substantial gainful activity by reason of any medically determined physical or mental impairment which can be expected to result in death, or has lasted or can be expected to last, for a continuous period of not less than 12 months ...”

The Lung Transplant Team can help you determine if you are still legally disabled or if you are able to return to work.

Going Back to Work

Our goal is for each transplant recipient to lead a fulfilling and productive life. For some, this might mean returning to work. Going back to work can help financially and also provide access to health insurance.

Some recipients may be able to return to the job they had before their transplant surgery. Others might need to change some aspects of their job. Others may need re-training so that they can find a different job.

At times, transplant recipients can run into barriers when they try to return to work. An employer might be worried about hiring someone who has had a transplant. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) provides some protection from this discrimination. The ADA law, and being better informed, can help an employer feel confident that transplant patients can be reliable employees.

Take Time to Recover

We encourage lung transplant recipients to go back to work if they choose to do so. But, it is important to give yourself plenty of time to recover from the surgery. Before you return to work after lung transplant surgery, please ask the UW Medicine Lung Transplant Team for a *medical release*.

Writing to Donor Families

Many patients ask about writing to the family of their organ donor. Most donor families are pleased to hear from the organ recipient.

It is your choice whether to write to the donor family. If you do write, it is helpful to talk about yourself, your family, your job or volunteer work, your hobbies, and your other interests. Donor families are often eager to hear about how having a transplant has changed your life. Be sure to thank the donor family for their gift.

To keep your letter confidential:

- Use **only** your first name.
- Do **not** include your address, phone number, email address, or other contact information.

Give your letter to the Lung Transplant Social Worker, who will help send it to the Organ Procurement Organization (OPO) for your donor. The OPO is a non-profit organization that manages organ donations. The OPO will then forward your letter to the donor's family.

When you give your card or letter to the social worker, include a separate piece of paper with your full name and the date of your transplant. This information is used to identify your donor's family. It will not be shared with them.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call the UW Medicine Lung Transplant Team if you have questions or concerns:

Weekdays from 8 am. to 4 p.m.: Call 206.598.5668.

After hours and on weekends and holidays: Call 206.598.6190 and ask to page the Pulmonary Transplant fellow on call.