

# Red Cross says blood supply at lowest level in 15 years

By Natalie DiBlasio, USA TODAY

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The [American Red Cross](#) says its national blood supply is at its lowest level in 15 years because of severe weather combined with a markedly slow summer of donations.

Summer is typically a time when donations are sluggish because people are away on vacations and schools that host blood drives are closed. Officials say this summer is worse than normal.

Severe storms in early July forced the cancellation of dozens of blood drives. Extreme heat has kept donors indoors and at home. And because [July 4th](#) fell in the middle of the week, more employees took extended vacations, and fewer businesses hosted blood drives.

"We just aren't seeing the donors coming through the door right now," says [Red Cross](#) spokeswoman Karen Stecher.

If things don't turn around, doctors may have to cancel elective surgeries if needed blood products aren't readily available.

"In a worst-case scenario, more serious procedures — things like liver transplants that require a lot of blood — will not start until there is enough blood on the shelves," says [Richard Benjamin](#), chief medical officer of the Red Cross. "We need to do everything we can to make sure it doesn't get to that point."

The Red Cross reached emergency levels June 25, with 50,000 fewer donations than expected in June. There are half as many blood products readily available today as at the same time last year.

America's Blood Centers, which collects half the nation's blood, says donations have been tight but not at the same emergency levels as the Red Cross.

"This summer is fairly typical — it's a constant struggle. We are scrambling to get donors," CEO Jim MacPherson says. "August is the killer month. So we will see."

Megan Hildebrand, 27, of Chicago started donating blood when she was 17 because of her mom, who needed two blood transfusions while she was pregnant with Megan.

"I felt it was my duty," Hildebrand says. "Someone helped save my mom's life — I wanted to do it in return."

Hildebrand tries to donate every 56 days, the most frequently a person is permitted to give blood.

"I am pretty religious about it, but definitely during the summer, I am less stringent," Hildebrand says. "In the summer, there are happy hours and trips and always stuff going on just taking advantage of the summer weather. It's harder to find space in your social schedule."

Lynn McCartney, 49, of Tallahassee says she is most likely to donate around the holidays and in the summer because that's when she hears about the shortages.

"I do it to save lives," says McCartney, who has donated more than 5 gallons of blood. "One of these days I might need blood. Somebody in my family might need blood, and I want it to be there."

The Blood Alliance, which is part of America's Blood Centers, provides blood to more than 40 hospitals and medical facilities in Florida, Georgia and [South Carolina](#) and bolsters summer blood drives with promotions.

The agency sends out bloodmobiles to sports stadiums and other venues to reach large, captive audiences and make it convenient for them to donate blood, spokeswoman Odette Struys says.

The Blood Alliance uses a free smartphone app called iDon8. It gives eligible donors a record of their previous donations, alerts them of their next available date to donate, provides locations of blood drives and sends out area notifications when the community blood supply becomes low or critical.

Around the country:

- Officials at the Nashville Red Cross headquarters hope for 50 to 60 blood donation appointments a day, but Tuesday only 31 people had signed up. The Tennessee Valley Blood Services Region, which includes 70 counties in Tennessee, Kentucky, Illinois and Missouri, has seen fewer than the 600 donors it needs each day to maintain its supply.

- The Northern California Community Blood Bank, which serves two counties, has three vehicles for mobile blood drives. "We like to have 50 to 60 donations a day, but we had a stretch where we were really low, getting down in the 20s and 30s. You can't survive on that for long," technical director Chris Stenlund says.

- In southern [New Jersey](#), where blood donations were 2,000 pints below expectations in June and early July, Red Cross officials met with 21 business leaders looking for help. Four firms scheduled blood drives.

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