

Blood Transfusion (Part II)

It is important not to take anti-clotting drugs before surgery to prevent excessive bleeding. Some herbal supplements such as ginkgo leaf extract, garlic extract and aloe extract can cause bleeding. People taking these and other Chinese medicines should stop consuming them at least two weeks before surgery.

Blood loss is often unavoidable. But there are ways to save some of it to reduce the amount needed from the blood bank. A process called intra-operative cell salvage is one way. It involves collecting blood shed during surgery, washing it and pumping it back into the patient. This is a good way to save blood, but it is not recommended for cancer patients.

Pre-operative autologous donation is another way. This involves taking blood from the patient and storing it for the operation. It should be done 2 to 3 months before the operation. It is not a routine practice in public hospitals and the method may encounter the same complications as storing allogeneic blood (allogeneic blood is one's own blood taken from different parts of the body).

A better way is to use blood taken from the patient a few hours before surgery. Transfusing blood donated by relatives is another practice. It is no difference from using allogeneic blood, and both can develop what is called graft-versus-host disease (GVHD). This happens when the recipient's immune system fails to recognise the white blood cells in the transfused blood as "foreign" and attacks the recipient's body tissues.