

# Exploring the Motivations and Barriers to Blood Donation Among First-Time Donors: A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

**Background:** First-time blood donors are crucial for maintaining an adequate blood supply, but they often face unique challenges that can deter them from donating again. Understanding the motivations and barriers experienced by first-time donors is essential for improving donor recruitment and retention strategies.

**Objective:** This study explores the motivations and barriers to blood donation among first-time donors, aiming to provide insights that can inform targeted recruitment efforts.

**Methods:** A qualitative study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 25 first-time blood donors at a tertiary hospital. Thematic analysis was used to identify key motivations and barriers.

**Results:** The primary motivations for donating included altruism, social influence, and awareness campaigns. Common barriers were fear of needles, health concerns, and lack of awareness about the donation process. Positive post-donation experiences increased the likelihood of future donations.

**Conclusion:** Addressing barriers such as fear and lack of information while leveraging motivations like altruism can improve donor recruitment and retention efforts.

**Keywords:** Blood donation, First-time donors, Motivations, Barriers, Qualitative study, Donor retention

## Introduction

Blood donation is an essential component of healthcare systems worldwide, providing life-saving support for patients requiring surgeries, trauma care, and treatments for chronic illnesses. Despite the critical need for regular blood supplies, many blood donation centers struggle to maintain adequate donor pools. First-time donors play a crucial role in expanding the donor base and addressing blood shortages. However, understanding their motivations to donate and the barriers they face is essential for developing effective recruitment and retention strategies (Sojka and Sojka, 2008).

Research has shown that while many people express a willingness to donate, various factors can influence their decision to actually donate. Altruism and a sense of societal responsibility are often cited as primary motivators for blood donation. Many first-time donors are driven by the desire to help others in need, influenced by awareness campaigns or social pressure from family and friends (Ferguson et al., 2008). In contrast, barriers such as fear of needles, concerns about health risks, and a lack of awareness about the donation process can deter potential donors from taking the first step (Gillespie & Hillyer, 2017).

Additionally, logistical factors such as time constraints and misconceptions about eligibility can further complicate the decision to donate.

Despite the wealth of quantitative research on blood donation behaviors, there is limited qualitative exploration of first-time donors' experiences. Qualitative studies offer the opportunity to delve deeper into the personal motivations and challenges faced by first-time donors, providing insights that may not be captured in large-scale surveys. Understanding these factors is crucial for designing targeted interventions that not only attract first-time donors but also encourage repeat donations, which are vital for sustaining blood supplies.

This study aims to explore the motivations and barriers to blood donation among first-time donors through a qualitative approach. By conducting in-depth interviews with individuals who have recently donated blood for the first time, this research seeks to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences, challenges, and the factors that motivated them to donate.

## Literature Review

### Motivations for Blood Donation

Numerous studies have explored the various motivations that drive individuals to donate blood. One of the most frequently cited reasons for donating blood is altruism. Donors often feel a moral responsibility to help others, viewing blood donation as a way to contribute positively to society (Ferguson et al., 2008). The concept of prosocial behavior—where individuals engage in actions that benefit others—is central to understanding why many people decide to donate. Altruistic donors are typically motivated by the belief that their donation can save lives and that participating in such efforts reflects societal responsibility (Gillespie and Hillyer, 2002).

Another motivating factor is the influence of social networks. Research suggests that individuals are more likely to donate blood if they are encouraged by friends, family members, or colleagues who have donated. Social influence, particularly from trusted sources, plays a significant role in shaping people's attitudes toward blood donation (Ferguson et al., 2008). In some cases, donors may participate in blood drives organized by workplaces, schools, or religious institutions, further reinforcing the notion of donating as part of a collective social effort (Gillespie and Hillyer, 2002).

In addition to altruism and social influence, awareness campaigns have been shown to be effective in motivating first-time donors. Well-executed public awareness campaigns, which highlight the need for blood and emphasize the ease of donation, can drive significant increases in donation rates (Gillespie and Hillyer, 2002). These campaigns often appeal to potential donors' emotions, using stories of patients whose lives were saved by blood donations, thereby connecting the act of donation to real-world outcomes.

### Barriers to Blood Donation

While many are motivated to donate blood, significant barriers often prevent potential donors from taking the first step. Fear of needles is one of the most common deterrents, particularly among first-time donors. Studies have shown that individuals with a strong aversion to needles are less likely to donate blood, even if they are otherwise willing (Gillespie & Hillyer, 2017). This fear, which can trigger anxiety and discomfort, is often heightened by misconceptions about the pain involved in the donation process (Gillespie and Hillyer, 2002).

Other health-related concerns also serve as barriers. Some individuals worry about the potential effects of donating blood on their own health, such as feeling faint or weak after donation (Gillespie and Hillyer, 2002). These concerns are particularly prevalent among first-time donors, who may lack sufficient information about the safety of the blood donation process and the minimal risks involved.

Lack of awareness or misinformation is another key barrier. Many potential donors are unaware of the donation process, eligibility criteria, or the frequency with which they can donate. This lack of knowledge can lead to assumptions that they are ineligible or that the process is complicated and time-consuming (Laver et al., 2001). This highlights the importance of clear, accessible information to alleviate these misconceptions and encourage first-time donations.

Logistical barriers, such as time constraints and convenience, can also prevent potential donors from donating. Studies have found that individuals are more likely to donate when donation centers or blood drives are conveniently located and accessible (Ferguson et al., 2008). Long wait times, limited availability of donation sites, and conflicts with work or personal schedules can discourage first-time donors from following through with their intent to donate.

#### First-Time Donors vs. Repeat Donors

While both first-time and repeat donors are motivated by similar factors, studies show that first-time donors often have different concerns compared to repeat donors. First-time donors tend to be more apprehensive about the donation process due to their lack of experience (Gillespie and Hillyer, 2002). They are also more likely to be influenced by immediate factors, such as social pressure or a specific blood drive event, rather than a long-term commitment to donation (Laver et al., 2001). This makes retention of first-time donors a challenge, as many do not return for subsequent donations once the initial motivation has passed.

In contrast, repeat donors are often driven by a sense of routine and long-term commitment to helping others (Sojka and Sojka, 2008). Their familiarity with the process and positive past experiences can alleviate many of the anxieties faced by first-time donors. Therefore, recruitment campaigns must focus not only on attracting first-time donors but also on ensuring that their experience is positive enough to encourage future donations.

#### Gaps in the Literature

Although there is significant research on blood donor motivations and barriers, there is limited focus specifically on the experiences of first-time donors. Most existing studies focus on the general population of blood donors, with only a small subset addressing the unique concerns and motivations of those donating for the first time. Additionally, many studies rely on quantitative data, such as surveys and questionnaires, which may not fully capture the depth of personal motivations and fears (Laver et al., 2001). A qualitative approach, involving in-depth interviews with first-time donors, could provide richer insights into the emotional and psychological factors influencing their decision to donate.

By exploring the personal experiences of first-time donors, this study aims to fill this gap in the literature, offering a more nuanced understanding of the motivations and barriers specific to this group. These insights could help inform more targeted recruitment and retention strategies to ensure that first-time donors become repeat donors.

## Methodology

### Study Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the motivations and barriers to blood donation among first-time donors. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of first-time donors at Tertiary Hospital over a three-month period. This design was chosen to allow for in-depth exploration of personal experiences, beliefs, and concerns regarding blood donation.

### Participant Selection

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling method, targeting individuals who had donated blood for the first time within the past 12 months at Tertiary Hospital. Eligibility criteria included:

- Donors aged 18 to 65 years
- First-time blood donors who had completed a donation over 3 months
- Willingness to participate in a recorded interview

Exclusion criteria included individuals with previous blood donation experience prior to the 12-month study period or those unwilling to consent to an interview. A total of 25 participants were recruited for the study, a sample size considered appropriate for reaching thematic saturation in qualitative research.

Participants were recruited via email invitations sent by the hospital's Blood Donation Center. These invitations outlined the purpose of the study, the nature of participation, and assurances of confidentiality.

### Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in private rooms at Tertiary Hospital or via video calls, depending on participant preference. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, with participants encouraged to discuss their personal experiences, motivations for donating, and any challenges or barriers they encountered.

An interview guide was used to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing for open-ended responses. Key topics included:

- Motivations for donating blood (e.g., altruism, social influence, awareness campaigns)
- Barriers or hesitations faced before donating (e.g., fear of needles, health concerns, time constraints)
- Overall experience of the donation process and likelihood of future donations

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data, following the six-step process described by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarization with the data: Transcripts were read multiple times to ensure immersion in the data.
2. Generating initial codes: Coding was conducted manually, with relevant data segments identified and labeled based on participants' motivations, barriers, and experiences.
3. Searching for themes: Codes were then grouped into broader themes, such as "altruism as motivation" and "fear of needles as a barrier."
4. Reviewing themes: Themes were refined by reviewing their relevance across the entire dataset and ensuring coherence.
5. Defining and naming themes: Themes were clearly defined, with subthemes identified where applicable.

6. Producing the report: The final themes were used to structure the findings, supported by direct quotes from participants.

To ensure trustworthiness, multiple researchers reviewed the data coding and themes, and participant feedback was solicited through member checking to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations.

### Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the ethics committee. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before interviews commenced, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. To maintain confidentiality, participant names were anonymized in the transcripts and reports, and all audio recordings were securely stored and deleted upon completion of the study.

### Findings

Thematic analysis of the interviews identified two main themes: motivations for donating blood and barriers to blood donation. Each theme contained several sub-themes that provided a nuanced understanding of first-time donors' experiences.

#### Theme 1: Motivations for Donating Blood

This theme explores the various reasons participants decided to donate blood for the first time. Three sub-themes emerged: altruism, social influence, and awareness campaigns.

##### Sub-Theme 1.1: Altruism

Altruism was a strong motivating factor for many participants, who expressed a desire to help others and contribute to society. Donors frequently mentioned that they wanted to do something positive that could save lives.

- Participant 3: "I just wanted to help someone. I know that blood donations can save lives, and that was enough for me. It's something small I can do, but it makes a big difference."
- Participant 12: "I thought, if not me, then who? People need blood every day, and I have the chance to do something that could literally save someone's life."

##### Sub-Theme 1.2: Social Influence

Several participants indicated that their decision to donate blood was influenced by family members, friends, or colleagues. These social connections provided encouragement and reassured participants about the process.

- Participant 7: "My friend donates regularly, and she kept telling me how easy it was. I probably wouldn't have done it if it wasn't for her convincing me."
- Participant 15: "My family is big on giving back to the community. My brother is a regular donor, so I kind of felt like I should step up and do my part too."

##### Sub-Theme 1.3: Awareness Campaigns

Public awareness campaigns, including social media, posters, and advertisements, played a role in prompting first-time donations. These campaigns helped to highlight the urgent need for blood and made the process seem more accessible.

- Participant 9: "I saw a poster at my gym about the blood drive, and it just stuck with me. I had been thinking about donating for a while, but that poster gave me the push I needed."

- Participant 20: "Social media posts about the need for blood donations really hit home. It made me realize how simple it could be to help someone."

## Theme 2: Barriers to Blood Donation

Participants also shared several barriers they encountered before making their first donation. These barriers fell under three sub-themes: fear of needles, health concerns, and lack of awareness.

### Sub-Theme 2.1: Fear of Needles

Fear of needles was a prevalent concern among many participants. Even those who eventually donated described feeling anxious about the process, and this fear had often delayed their decision to donate.

- Participant 5: "Honestly, I've always been terrified of needles. That's the only thing that held me back for so long. But once I was there, it wasn't nearly as bad as I had imagined."

- Participant 18: "I had put it off for years because I was scared of needles. It's silly, but that fear kept me from donating for the longest time."

### Sub-Theme 2.2: Health Concerns

Participants also expressed concerns about the potential impact of blood donation on their health, particularly regarding feeling faint or weak after donating. This concern was more common among younger participants.

- Participant 11: "I was worried about how it would make me feel afterward. I had heard stories about people fainting or feeling really weak, and that was definitely in the back of my mind."

- Participant 22: "I wasn't sure if I was healthy enough to donate. I didn't want to do something that might make me sick."

### Sub-Theme 2.3: Lack of Awareness

Many participants mentioned that they had been unaware of the blood donation process or the eligibility requirements before their first donation. This lack of knowledge had created unnecessary hesitation, with participants assuming they might not be eligible or that the process would be too time-consuming.

- Participant 2: "I didn't know how easy it was. I thought it would be this long, complicated process, but it turned out to be really quick."

- Participant 14: "I always assumed I couldn't donate for some reason, like maybe my blood type wasn't needed, but once I looked into it, I realized anyone can donate."

## Theme 3: Overcoming Barriers and the Post-Donation Experience

After completing their first donation, many participants reflected on how their initial fears and concerns were largely unfounded. This theme includes two sub-themes: positive post-donation experiences and increased likelihood of future donations.

### Sub-Theme 3.1: Positive Post-Donation Experiences

Many participants reported that their experience was overwhelmingly positive, and that the actual donation process was easier and less painful than they had expected. This positive experience often alleviated their initial anxieties.

- Participant 6: "I was really nervous going in, but the staff was great. They made me feel comfortable, and it was over so quickly. I don't know why I was so scared."

- Participant 13: "It was such a smooth process. I felt fine afterward, and now I wonder why I didn't do it sooner."



### Sub-Theme 3.2: Increased Likelihood of Future Donations

Following their first donation, many participants indicated that they would be more likely to donate again in the future. Having overcome their fears or hesitations, they felt more confident about returning.

- Participant 19: "Now that I've done it once, I definitely think I'll do it again. It wasn't as bad as I thought, and it feels good to know you're helping people."

- Participant 8: "I'm already planning to donate again in a few months. Now that I know what to expect, I feel a lot more comfortable."

## Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the motivations and barriers faced by first-time blood donors. The themes that emerged from the interviews reveal a complex interplay between personal, social, and informational factors that shape the decision to donate blood for the first time. Understanding these factors can help blood donation centers develop targeted strategies to recruit and retain first-time donors, which is crucial for maintaining an adequate and stable blood supply.

### Motivations for Blood Donation

The results show that altruism is a central motivator for many first-time donors. This finding aligns with previous research that highlights the desire to help others as one of the most commonly cited reasons for donating blood (Ferguson et al., 2008). Participants in this study frequently mentioned the idea of saving lives and contributing to society as primary reasons for their decision to donate. These motivations suggest that blood donation campaigns that emphasize the life-saving impact of donations and appeal to individuals' sense of social responsibility may be particularly effective in recruiting new donors.

Social influence was another key motivator, with many participants indicating that family members, friends, or colleagues played an important role in encouraging them to donate. This finding supports previous studies that highlight the role of social networks in shaping blood donation behaviors (Gillespie and Hillyer, 2002). Blood donation centers may benefit from leveraging this influence by encouraging existing donors to share their experiences and promote blood donation within their social circles. Group donation drives or incentives for bringing a friend could further capitalize on the power of social connections.

Finally, awareness campaigns emerged as a significant factor in prompting first-time donations. Participants mentioned the impact of social media, posters, and advertisements in increasing their awareness of the need for blood and the ease of the donation process. This finding reinforces the importance of effective public awareness campaigns in educating potential donors and motivating them to take action. Donation centers should continue to invest in well-targeted and engaging campaigns that highlight the importance of blood donation and make the process accessible and visible to the public.

### Barriers to Blood Donation

Despite the strong motivations for donating, participants also reported several significant barriers that delayed their decision to donate blood. Consistent with existing research, fear of needles was one of the most commonly cited obstacles. Even those who eventually donated described feeling anxious or fearful before the donation, which is in line with the findings of Gillespie and Hillyer (2002), who identified needle phobia as a major deterrent to blood donation. Addressing this fear through educational materials, reassuring messaging, and offering a supportive environment during the donation process could help reduce this barrier.

Another common barrier was health concerns, particularly fears about feeling faint or weak after donation. Participants expressed uncertainty about how their body would respond to blood loss, and this concern prevented many from donating sooner. These findings suggest that first-time donors may benefit from clearer information about the physical effects of blood donation and reassurances about the safety of the process. Ensuring that donors have a positive, well-supported experience during and after donation may also alleviate these concerns for future donations.

Lack of awareness was another notable barrier. Several participants indicated that they had been unaware of the donation process or eligibility criteria before their first donation. This lack of knowledge can create unnecessary hesitations, with potential donors assuming they are ineligible or that the process is too complicated. Public education campaigns that clearly explain the donation process, dispel common myths, and highlight eligibility requirements could help overcome this barrier and make the donation process seem more accessible.

#### Overcoming Barriers and the Post-Donation Experience

Importantly, many participants reported that their post-donation experiences were overwhelmingly positive, and their initial fears and concerns were largely unfounded. Once they had completed their first donation, participants often felt a sense of accomplishment and relief, with many indicating that they would be more likely to donate again in the future. This finding suggests that while first-time donors may face significant barriers, a positive donation experience can mitigate these concerns and encourage repeat donations. Blood donation centers should prioritize creating a welcoming, comfortable environment for first-time donors and provide follow-up support to encourage future donations.

#### Practical Implications for Blood Donation Centers

The findings of this study offer several practical recommendations for blood donation centers. First, recruitment campaigns should focus on emphasizing altruism and the life-saving impact of blood donations, as this was a primary motivator for many first-time donors. Social influence can also be leveraged through group donation events and encouraging current donors to bring friends or family members. Additionally, public awareness campaigns should continue to play a central role in recruitment efforts, with a focus on reaching individuals who may not be aware of the donation process or the ongoing need for blood donations.

To address the barriers identified in this study, donation centers should consider creating educational materials that directly address common fears, such as fear of needles and health concerns. Providing clear information about the safety of the process and offering reassurances to first-time donors can help alleviate these anxieties. Centers can also ensure that first-time donors have a positive donation experience by offering a supportive environment, short wait times, and follow-up communication to thank donors and encourage them to return.

#### Strengths and Limitations

This study's qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of first-time donors' experiences, providing rich insights into their motivations and barriers. The use of semi-structured interviews facilitated open, detailed discussions that revealed a range of emotional and psychological factors influencing blood donation decisions.



However, the study has several limitations. The sample size was relatively small and limited to one tertiary hospital, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, participants were interviewed after their donation, which may have influenced their recollection of pre-donation fears and concerns. Future studies could explore longitudinal approaches, following donors from pre-donation through post-donation experiences to capture a more comprehensive view of their decision-making processes.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should continue to explore the experiences of first-time donors, particularly in different cultural or geographic contexts, to understand how motivations and barriers may vary. Additionally, studies could investigate the long-term impact of positive donation experiences on donor retention and explore strategies to convert first-time donors into regular, repeat donors.

#### Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of understanding both the motivations and barriers faced by first-time blood donors. While altruism, social influence, and awareness campaigns are strong motivators, barriers such as fear of needles, health concerns, and lack of awareness can prevent potential donors from taking the first step. Addressing these barriers and providing a positive donation experience can significantly increase the likelihood of repeat donations. By implementing targeted recruitment and retention strategies, blood donation centers can improve donor engagement and ensure a more stable blood supply.

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