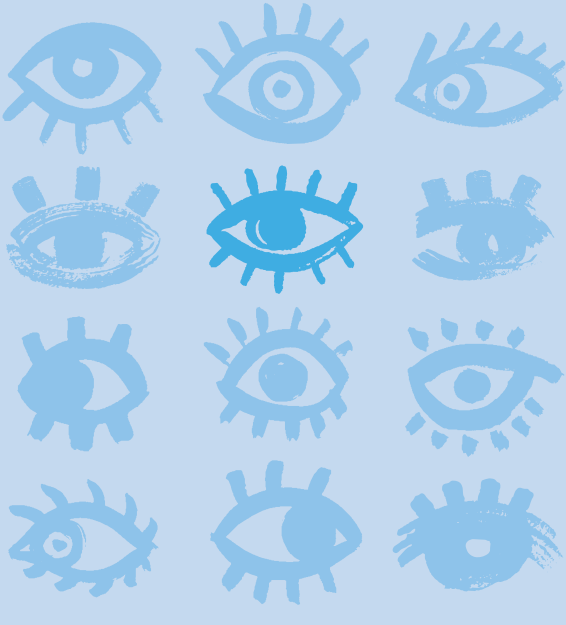
National Healthcare Communication Programme

Corneal Donation Telephone Conversation

HEALTH AND LIFESTYLE QUESTIONNAIRE (HLQ)

A leaflet for healthcare staff



Making conversations easier

> *The gift of sight is yours to truly enjoy and also yours to give away. Think about passing it on when it's time.*

Brings you back to contents

Corneal Donation Telephone Conversation

HEALTH AND LIFESTYLE QUESTIONNAIRE (HLQ)

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Corneal Donation Telephone Conversation

HEALTH AND LIFESTYLE QUESTIONNAIRE (HLQ)

Initiating the call

Preparation

Communication skills

- [ ] Prepare yourself
- [ ] Prepare the environment
- [ ] Prepare your information
- [ ] Clarify roles

Prepare yourself

- Take a moment to steady yourself and focus before dialling. Remind yourself: the purpose is to explore corneal donation sensitively and complete the HLQ effectively.
- Give yourself one calm breath before you dial. A brief pause can help you sound more settled and in control when the call is answered.

Prepare the environment

- Ensure a quiet, private space with no interruptions.
- Ensure the witness is present and can hear the call.

Initiating the call

Prepare your information

- Have everything you need in front of you (donor details, HLQ, consent form). This reduces the need to search for information mid-call and helps the conversation feel smoother and more contained for the family.
- Review donor name, date of birth, hospice/location, and time of death.
- Check for any record of an Expression of Intent to donate.
- Familiarise yourself with the three HLQ sections (medical history, travel, lifestyle).

Clarify roles

- Agree with the witness how consent and responses will be documented, and who is responsible for each part of the process.

Corneal Donation Telephone Conversation

HEALTH AND LIFESTYLE QUESTIONNAIRE (HLQ)

Initiating the call

Establishing initial rapport

Communication skills

- ☐ Greeting and introductions
- ☐ Confirm who you are speaking to
- ☐ Introduce the witness
- ☐ Check timing and readiness

Greeting and introductions

- Introduce yourself, your role, and the purpose of the call while expressing condolences clearly and sensitively.

Hello, my name is [name]. I'm calling from the Eye Bank at the Irish Blood Transfusion Service.

Can I say how very sorry I am for your loss, and that I know you will have a lot on your mind and a lot to do at the moment.

The reason I am calling today is quite specific. I would like to tell you about something called corneal tissue donation. If you are able to, I would like to discuss with you whether it would be alright for [name of deceased] to donate some of their eye tissue.

Corneal Donation Telephone Conversation

HEALTH AND LIFESTYLE QUESTIONNAIRE (HLQ)

Initiating the call

Confirm who you are speaking to

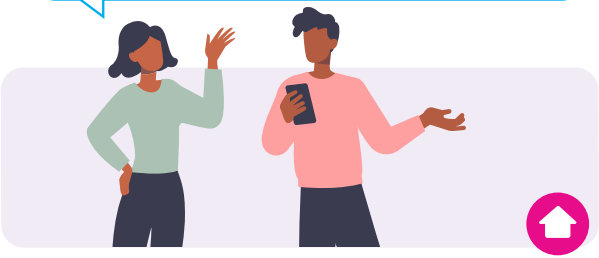
- Check you are speaking with the correct person and that they are appropriate to give consent according to policy.

Am I speaking with [name], [relationship to donor]?

Introduce the witness

- Explain the witness's presence and role transparently, and seek permission for them to remain on the call.

I also have my colleague [witness name] here with me. What we do at the Eye Bank is to have someone listening to the call as a witness, and help document the conversation. Do I have your permission to continue with [witness name] present?



Initiating the call

Check timing and readiness

- Check whether this is an acceptable time to talk and offer the option to pause or reschedule if needed.

Is now an okay time for you to talk, or would you prefer that I call you back a little later?

This call may take [X] minutes because I need to ask you some questions about [donor's name]'s health and medical history. Is that something you feel able to do at the moment?

If at any point you need a break or feel you can't continue, please just say so and we can pause or come back to things later.

TIP

If the family member sounds overwhelmed, offer to pause, or reschedule and validate that this is understandable.

Initiating the call

Non-verbal behaviour

Communication skills

- [ ] Attend to your own non verbal signals
- [ ] Use vocal tone and pace to convey warmth
- [ ] Use silence and breathing to support the family

Attend to your own non-verbals

- Notice your posture, facial expression, and breathing before you dial.
  A grounded, steady posture can help you sound calmer and more contained.
- Take a slow breath out before you speak; this can soften your tone and help you sound less rushed or tense.

Initiating the call

Use vocal tone and pace to convey warmth

- Use a gentle, steady tone of voice and avoid speaking too quickly, especially when giving information or asking sensitive questions.
- Allow brief pauses between questions so the family member has time to process and respond.
- Keep your volume moderate – loud enough to be heard clearly, but not so loud that it feels intrusive.

Use silence and breathing to support the family

- Notice long pauses, sighs or changes in the person's breathing, and respond with empathy, for example:

  I can hear this is very difficult for you.

- Allow silence after emotional statements rather than rushing in to fill the gap; this can signal respect and give the person time to gather themselves.

Initiating the call

Use silence and breathing to support the family *(Contd.)*

- If you feel yourself becoming tense or emotional, take a slow, quiet breath to steady yourself before continuing.

TIP

Your own body language affects your tone. Sitting upright, with both feet on the floor and a relaxed jaw and shoulders, can help you sound calmer, warmer, and more reassuring on the phone.

Gathering information

Assessing understanding and explaining purpose

Communication skills

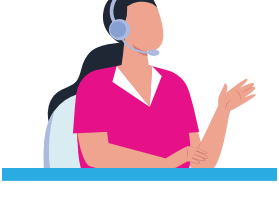
- [ ] Check what they already know
- [ ] Check about information leaflet
- [ ] Check for expression of intent
- [ ] Explain purpose and structure

Check what they already know

- Explore what the family has already been told to avoid repetition and correct any misunderstandings.

Before I explain anything, can I check whether you've already been told about corneal donation for [donor's name]?

Please tell me what you've already been told?



Gathering information

Check about information leaflet

- Ask whether they have seen the leaflet and offer to clarify or summarise key points in simple language. *"Have you been given, or had a chance to read, the corneal donation information leaflet?"*
- If yes: *"Was there anything in that you'd like me to clarify before we start?"*
- If no/not sure: briefly summarise key points (what is donated, time limits, effect on appearance and funeral, safety checks).

Check for expression of intent

- Ask sensitively whether the donor ever expressed a wish to donate, and acknowledge any prior conversations or documentation.

Do you know if [donor's name] ever expressed a wish to donate their corneas, for example by signing an Expression of Intent form or talking with you about donation?

Gathering information

Explain purpose and structure

- Clearly explain why you are asking health and lifestyle questions and outline the main sections of the HLQ.

So, like I said, the reason for my call is to talk with you about the possibility of corneal donation, and to ask you some questions about [donor's name]'s health.

I need to ask you these questions. The law in Ireland and Europe says we must ask about these things so as to make sure that, if donation goes ahead, it is safe for anyone who receives the transplant.

So, there are going to be three parts to what I'll ask you:

- *Some questions about recent medical history and illnesses.*
- *Some questions about past travel.*
- *Some questions about lifestyle.*

I'll explain each part as we go, and we can pause at any time if you need a break.

Gathering information

TIP

Use the person's name occasionally and acknowledge effort, for example:

> *Thank you, [name], I know this is a lot to remember.*

This helps the call feel like a conversation rather than an interview. However, use their name sparingly so it continues to feel natural and sincere.

Gathering information

Introducing the Health & Lifestyle Questionnaire (HLQ)

Communication skills

- [ ] Normalise and provide rationale
- [ ] Offer choice and control

Normalise and provide rationale

- Normalise the sensitive questions and explain that they are routine safety checks for every potential donor.

Some of the questions might feel very personal. Some of them might feel really irrelevant to your [loved one]. I'm very sorry if they feel intrusive. We are required by law to ask this of everyone.

So, we ask these questions of all families for every potential donor. They're part of the safety checking we must complete to protect people who receive corneal transplants.

Gathering information

Normalise and provide rationale *(Contd.)*

Some people find this next part quite intrusive, we know it can be hard. These questions are part of the safety checks we must complete for every donor, and they help protect the person who may receive the transplant. Please know that we ask these questions of all families.

Please answer to the best of your knowledge. You might not always have the precise answers to the questions, but let us know what you can.

Offer choice and control

- Emphasise that the family can pause, skip, or return to questions, giving them a sense of control over the conversation.

So, just to reiterate, we can pause, skip, or return to questions at any time.

Gathering information

Offer choice and control *(Contd.)*

If at any point you feel you can't answer a question, or you're not sure, just tell me, and we can move on or come back to it later.

If you need a pause at any point, please just say so.

TIP

Check understanding in simple language and avoid jargon. If you find yourself giving a long explanation, pause and ask:

What questions do you have for me now?

Gathering information

Conducting the Health & Lifestyle Questionnaire (HLQ)

Communication skills

- Signpost each section
- Use clear, neutral, non-judgemental language
- Acknowledge emotions
- Check understanding and pace

Signpost each section

- Introduce each part of the questionnaire so the family knows what to expect and why you are asking particular questions.

I'll start with some questions about recent medical history.

Now I'm going to ask a few questions about travel.

The next part includes questions about lifestyle and sexual health. We ask these questions about every potential donor.

These questions might feel really irrelevant, but like I said, we are required by law to ask them about every single possible corneal donor.

Gathering information

Use, clear, neutral, non-judgemental language

- Ask about sensitive topics in a calm, factual way that avoids judgmental wording or tone.
- Maintain a calm, even tone when asking about:
  - Operations, illnesses, or transplants
  - Serious infections (for example, hepatitis, HIV, TB, malaria)
  - Travel history
  - Recreational or injected drug use
  - Sexual history and sexually transmitted infections

Gathering information

Acknowledge emotions

- Notice and name when something is difficult to talk about, and thank the person for their effort in answering.

I appreciate that this is not easy to talk about, especially at a time like this.

Thank you, I know this may be hard to remember or discuss.

It's absolutely fine if you're not sure of the exact dates – just tell me what you can.

Gathering information

Check understanding and pace

- Regularly check that the questions are clear and adjust your pace in response to the family's reactions.

Is there anything I could explain more clearly to you?

Would you like me to repeat or explain any of the questions?

TIP

Keep very alert to changes in their voice, or long pauses, or sighs.

I can hear this is difficult. Would you like to take a moment?

Providing information and planning

Summarising and clarifying

Communication skills

- [ ] Brief summary
- [ ] Check accuracy

Brief summary

- Summarise the key points back to the family to show you have listened and to check shared understanding. Use the summary not just to check accuracy, but also to show you have listened: emphasise key points the family member seemed most concerned about.

Thank you for answering those questions. Just to make sure I have everything correct, I'll briefly summarise what you've told me.

Providing information and planning

Check accuracy

- Invite the family to correct or add details so the record is accurate, and they feel heard.

Does that sound right to you, or is there anything I've missed or misunderstood?

Providing information and planning

Explaining what corneal donation involves

Communication skills

- [ ] Explain procedure and timing
- [ ] Reassure about appearance and dignity
- [ ] Explain storage and use
- [ ] Confidentiality and follow up
- [ ] Check for questions

Explain procedure and timing

- Describe the procedure and time limits in small, manageable chunks, pausing to check understanding. Offer information in small pieces and pause regularly to ask, "*How does that sound?*" or "*Is that clear?*" This can prevent the person from feeling overwhelmed.

If donation goes ahead, a specialist doctor will perform a short surgical procedure to remove only the clear front part of the eye – the cornea – which is about the size of a contact lens. The eyes themselves are not removed.

Providing information and planning

Explain procedure and timing *(Contd.)*

This will take place in [location], and it needs to happen within 24-hours of death so that the corneas remain healthy.

- When describing procedures, move between facts and reassurance: explain one step, then briefly reassure about comfort, dignity, or appearance before moving to the next step.

Reassure about appearance and dignity

- Reassure the family that their loved one's appearance and dignity will be carefully maintained, and funerals will not be disrupted.

The eyelids will be gently closed afterwards, and great care is taken to preserve [donor's name]'s appearance and dignity at all times.

Once [donor's name]'s eyelids have been closed, no one can tell that donation has even happened.

The procedure will not interfere with any funeral arrangements, including an open casket if that is what you wish.

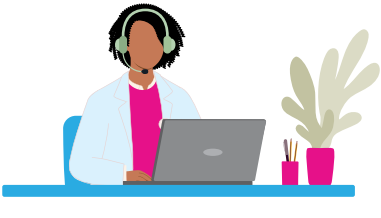
Providing information and planning

Explain storage and use

- Give clear information about how corneas are stored, assessed, and possibly used for training if consent is given.

Corneas are stored for up to one month after they have been removed.

If, after examination, a cornea is not suitable for transplantation, it will be disposed of in an ethical and lawful way, or, if you consent, may be used for training and surgical technique development.



Corneal Donation Telephone Conversation

HEALTH AND LIFESTYLE QUESTIONNAIRE (HLQ)

Providing information and planning

Confidentiality and follow-up

- Explain how personal and consent information will be stored, and when the Eye Bank* might contact the family in future.

If there were any unexpected blood test results, we might need to contact you.

Your contact and consent details will be stored in the strictest confidence by the Irish Blood Transfusion's Eye Bank.

The Eye Bank may communicate with you after the donation, for example with a thank you card, and sometimes there may be indirect communication from recipients, such as a card or note, depending on circumstances and your preferences.

Check for questions

- Invite questions and clarify any remaining concerns before moving towards a decision.

Are there questions you have about the procedure or what happens next?

*Irish Blood Transfusion Services

Providing information and planning

Supporting decision-making

Communication skills

- [ ] Explore what is important
- [ ] Acknowledge difficulty
- [ ] Check if they need time

Explore what is important

- Explore the donor's values and what matters most to the family to support a decision that feels right for them. Keep bringing the focus back to what matters most to the family and to the donor's values. This can help them feel more confident that whatever they decide is the "*right*" decision for them.

What feels most important to you and your family right now, when you think about [donor's name] and donation?

Corneal Donation Telephone Conversation

HEALTH AND LIFESTYLE QUESTIONNAIRE (HLQ)

Providing information and planning

Acknowledge difficulty

- Name and validate how hard this decision is at a time of acute grief.

We know this is an incredibly difficult decision to be making at such a painful time.

Check if they need time

- Offer time to talk with others where possible, while explaining any time limits clearly and kindly.

Would you like a little time to talk with other family members, or are you able to make a decision now?

- If time is needed:

Because of the time limits for corneal donation, we would need to know by [time] at the latest. Would it help if I called you back then?

Closing the call

If the family decides to proceed

Communication skills

- [ ] Confirm consent
- [ ] Explain next steps
- [ ] Express appreciation and meaning
- [ ] Close with support

Confirm consent

- Clearly confirm consent in straightforward language and ensure it is appropriately documented.

Can I just confirm that you are giving consent for [donor's name]'s corneas to be donated?

Closing the call

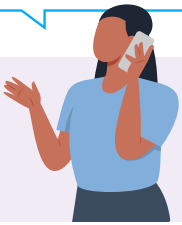
Explain next steps

- Outline what will happen next, including location, procedure, and arrangements, in a simple, stepwise way.

It will be a very short surgical procedure. It'll take place in [location].

Afterwards, [donor's name]'s eyelids will be closed, so that there is no sign that any surgery has happened. And we'll ensure they are treated with the utmost respect before, during and after the procedure.

When the procedure has been completed, we'll contact the funeral director, and arrangements will be made for [donor's name]'s remains to be moved to the funeral parlour as planned.



Closing the call

Express appreciation and meaning

- Acknowledge the generosity of the decision and highlight its potential impact for recipients.

Thank you very much for taking the time to talk with me today and for considering donation at such a difficult moment.

This generous gift of corneal donation could help up to two people to see again. I hope that, in time, it may bring you and your family some comfort to know that [donor's name] has helped others in this way.

TIP

Briefly restate the meaning of their decision ("*This may help up to two people to see again*") – many families later report that this is what they remember and draw comfort from.

Closing the call

Close with support

- Slow the pace, check for final questions, and end the call with warmth and condolences. A calm, unhurried ending can help the conversation feel more containing and respectful.

Do you have any other questions or concerns before we finish?

If you think of anything afterwards, you can contact us on [Eye Bank phone number].

Once again, I'm very sorry for your loss, and I wish you and your family strength in the days ahead.

Closing the call

If the family decides not to proceed

Communication skills

- [ ] Acknowledge and respect the decision
- [ ] Offer final questions
- [ ] Close with support

Acknowledge and respect the decision

- Respect the family's choice and recognise the care and thought they have given, without pressure or judgement.

Thank you for discussing this with us. We hear and respect your decision not to proceed. We appreciate the care and thought you've given to this at such a difficult time.

Thank you for taking the time to talk with us. We respect your decision not to proceed and we again wish to express our sincere sympathy on your loss.

Closing the call

Offer final questions

- Give space for any final questions or clarifications before ending the call.

Before we end the call, is there anything you'd like to ask me, or anything that wasn't clear?

Close with support

- Close with sincere condolences and a warm, steady tone, regardless of the decision made.

I'm very sorry for your loss and I wish you and your family strength in the days ahead.

Corneal Donation Telephone Conversation

HEALTH AND LIFESTYLE QUESTIONNAIRE (HLQ)

Self-care for staff

Communication skills

- ☐ Acknowledge emotional impact
- ☐ Seek support
- ☐ Basic self-care

Acknowledge emotional impact

- Notice and name the emotional impact of these calls on yourself, especially after difficult conversations.

Seek support

- Use supervision, debriefing, or informal team support to process particularly distressing calls.

Corneal Donation Telephone Conversation

HEALTH AND LIFESTYLE QUESTIONNAIRE (HLQ)

Self-care for staff

Basic self-care

- Take short breaks, hydrate, and move briefly to help maintain your capacity for calm, compassionate contact.

TIP

Reflect briefly on your own reactions after calls and consider a check in with a colleague or supervisor if needed.

This Skills Card is the work of the National Healthcare Communication Programme in conjunction with the Irish Blood Transfusion Service.