



The Basics

Selling body parts for cash

No, you cannot legally sell even one of your kidneys, but you can peddle plasma and a few of the other things your body produces. And, in some cases, the price is right.

By [Karen Aho](#)

Isn't it time your body earned its keep?

By law, you can't sell your body even after you're dead. But you can get it to slip you a few 20s -- or thousands -- while you're still alive, by "donating" some of the extra pieces. Not too much is marketable, but what is can be offloaded for a price if it's in good condition.

What can you sell?

Plasma can be yellow gold

The 1984 National Organ Transplantation Act makes it illegal to sell human organs, a rule generally applied to tissues. So companies "compensate" donors for their time.

The big market: plasma, the protein-packed liquid component of blood used to manufacture lifesaving clotting factors and immune boosters, among others. These therapeutics comprise a \$7.8 billion annual global market, according to the [Marketing Research Bureau](#), with more than 70% of the source plasma originating from inside Americans.

This strong, steady demand simply can't be met by unpaid volunteers. Ten million of the 12 million liters we pump out annually is from paid donors, many of them regulars pocketing \$200-plus a month.

"It's easy," said Ryan Elkins, a 26-year-old disabled Iraq war veteran who makes \$55 a week for three hours of "sitting still." It's boring, he said, and he'd rather be back on explosives duty. But it helps buy the groceries for his family as he begins taxidermy school in Spokane, Wash.

Donors profiled on the [BioLife Plasma Services](#) Web site have sold plasma for decades, accumulating decent sums toward school, kids, home repairs, even missionary work. One woman uses the money to send her husband away on trips. Here's how it works:

If you can give blood, you can sell plasma -- probably. The eligibility requirements are similar. You must be 18, weigh at least 110 pounds, be free of communicable disease and in basic good health with strong iron levels.

There is no cross-contamination. Blood is drawn into an apheresis machine -- essentially a centrifuge. As it spins, plasma, the lightest component in blood, separates out and drips into a bag, which you can watch fill and turn yellow as you read the giant informed-consent brochure you just signed. At various intervals the machine thrums to a halt and reverses direction, returning the remaining blood down the same tube along with some saline solution. Your blood comes into contact only with disposable plastic parts.

Seriously, though, read the brochure. There can be side effects: allergic reactions, dizziness, nausea. (For more, see this [FDA letter](#).) The U.S. Food and Drug Administration limits each donation to between 625 milliliters (1.3 pints) and 880 milliliters (1.9 pints), depending on body weight, at no more than twice a week. In the United States you can give up to 91.5 liters, or 193 pints, a year, far more than other countries allow.

With a little patience . . . Companies pay extra to bring you back. The first visit in a week might pay \$25, the second \$35. Plasma is 90% water and regenerates in 48 hours. At each visit, someone checks your vitals, then you recline in the chair for an hour. You cannot sleep, because attendants must know that you've not passed out.

It's a large-bore needle. Need more be said here?

Not every state has a paid donation center. Several companies recently pulled out of the business. To see if there's one near you, check the [FDA search engine](#) and select "Establishment Type: Plasmapheresis Center." Or visit the [Plasma Protein Therapeutics Association](#).

For men only

It's far easier to get a date than a sperm-donor card. About 95% of men who apply don't make the cut.

For those who do, though, hoo ha! It can mean up to \$1,000 a month for 1½ to two years, enough to pay the rent through graduate school.

For every 1,000 men who seek information about the [California Cryobank](#), a leading service with locations near top-tier colleges, only nine become donors.

Applicants complete a 40-page medical history covering three generations, then get culled for buyer preference.

Video: [Sell your body to science](#)

"We make sure he's not too short, too fat, too tall or too ugly," said Dr. Cappy Rothman, a clinic co-founder.

The ideal donor: 6 feet, medium build, medium complexion, blond or brown hair, green or blue eyes, a college background, dimples. This is what women want.

Then there's the sample. Donors must have sperm counts of 400 million to 500 million, twice the norm. And most of these sperm must be faster than an ordinary sperm, more powerful than an ordinary sperm, able to leap tall petri dishes in a single bound! Unfortunately it's supersperm for only one in four men.

Even those who think they're made of steel sometimes choose to opt out of the responsibility: frequent health checks, up to thrice-weekly deposits and periods of abstinence. Not to mention the idea of being progenitor to as many as 35 very real human beings.

This isn't an industry that keeps good count. But Dr. Charles Sims, who undertook a survey as chairman of the Reproductive Council of the [American Association of Tissue Banks](#) last year, estimates it's an \$80 million industry with some 1,500 active sperm donors.

Despite a growing movement toward open donation -- where children can contact their donor parent at 18 -- Sims believes banks can continue to guarantee anonymity.

Seeking young women

The female egg, or ovum, is 90,000 times bigger than the male sperm, so it's worth more. Just how much more is unclear. In an industry that critics charge is underregulated, insiders don't know exactly what most donors are paid or even how many donors are out there.

A recent survey turned up an average of \$4,217 per donation, but some clinics didn't participate, and donors frequently claim payments of \$10,000 or more. Those targeted -- typically young coeds -- see ads promising tens of thousands from couples in search of that very healthy, tall, bright, beautiful young woman. If she's on a soccer scholarship and just won an arts grant, even better.

Still, the price is projected to remain high. The American Society for Reproductive Medicine says donor eggs or embryos were used in 15,175 artificial reproduction attempts in 2004 and that demand

is growing. People are accepting the idea that if someone else's plump, youthful egg has a better shot, why not use it? Meanwhile, women who've been donors and made a good dent in their student loans or credit card debt say they'd do it again.

But that bloated pay figure can be misleading. Egg donation is far more labor intensive than sperm donation and carries health risks. To stimulate the production of extra eggs -- say one or two dozen -- the donor is placed on hormone injections for weeks and the eggs are extracted under anesthesia with a needle. The process can cause ovarian hyperstimulation, which in rare cases can be life-threatening.

Those considering becoming a donor should seek an outside opinion and read the fine print: Make sure any associated health issues will be covered by the buyer.

For more information, visit the [Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology](#).

'I've got my hair'

The self-styled posts on the Internet are intoxicating: asking \$600 for long locks of "virgin hair," never colored, never blow-dried, never rooted in the flesh of fatty foods and hard living. But are people really paying?

Video: [Sell your body to science](#)

Renee Sirokman is dubious. She's been buying hair to make wigs for the family business, [World of Wigs](#), for nearly 40 years and has yet to meet such a high bidder. "If this was true," she said, "then wouldn't everybody be selling hair?"

She can, however, guarantee that a wig company will pay up to \$5 an ounce for hair that's in decent shape. Most heads would pass muster, as long as the hair is not severely overprocessed, is at least 12 inches long and is [packaged properly](#). A foot-long pony tail weighs 2 to 8 ounces, meaning a year in the hair-growth market might gross you a few bottles of shampoo. But, as Sirokman tells people, "Why would you want the hair to hit the ground if you can sell it?"

But wait, there's more

Got milk? Breast milk costs \$3.50 an ounce, and baby needs 25 ounces a day: A Beverly Hills household-staffing company made news when it hired out wet nurses. There don't appear to be others, according to the [La Leche League](#), nor any public businesses buying breast milk, but experts don't doubt that private sales routinely take place.

It's true, you can live safely with one kidney. But rumors of \$50,000 apiece on the black market overseas are just that; buyers can get one in a village in India, or in Baghdad, for \$700.

"Donate" to research. Tissue didn't make it past the private screeners? Research hospitals and drug companies pay for the same products for studies.

Don't like the idea of selling yourself? Then actually, really, donate. Give whole blood at a community blood bank. Only 5% of eligible donors do so, and there is a chronic short supply. And there are several breast-milk banks that accept donations to feed babies who can't handle formula.

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