

Ms Lau Tang Trong donating blood at the Health Sciences Authority's Bloodbank in Outram on May 17. She has given blood 173 times so far. ST PHOTOS: EUGENE TAN



Donating is in their blood

Meet five everyday heroes contributing to the cause in Singapore



Amrita Kaur

World Blood Donor Day is celebrated annually on June 14 to raise awareness of the importance of blood donation and encourage more people to become regular donors.

The event was initiated in 2004 by four international organisations – the World Health Organisation, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Society of Blood Transfusion, and the International Federation of Blood Donor Organisations.

Blood is needed to save lives during emergencies and sustain the lives of those with medical conditions such as leukaemia, thalassaemia and bleeding disorders, as well as patients undergoing major surgery.

One unit of blood can save three lives, and in Singapore, 15 units of blood are used every hour of the day, says Mr Prakash Menon, group director of the Singapore Red Cross' blood donor programme.

"We need to collect about 400 units of blood daily to meet the needs of patients in Singapore. Only healthy blood donors can contribute, and currently, only 1.8 per

cent of Singapore's residential population are blood donors," he adds.

World Blood Donor Day is also dedicated to the individuals who voluntarily and regularly donate blood to help save lives.

The Singapore Red Cross theme for 2023's World Blood Donor Day is Everyday Heroes, celebrating ordinary people who make extraordinary impacts.

The Straits Times speaks to five champions who have made it a life-long commitment to contribute to the cause.

STEPPING UP FOR A COLLEAGUE

As a university student, Ms Lau Tang Trong often saw blood donation drives on campus, but never felt driven to give her blood.

But at her first job at UOB, where she was working as a bank officer in 1992, she decided to step up in support of a colleague who was diagnosed with leukaemia.

"The bank had organised a blood donation drive, so my colleagues and I came together to donate blood that day during office hours. I realised how a simple act could help someone in need," says the 52-year-old single mother, who now runs her own technology company.

The process was so seamless and pain-free that she decided to make it a lifelong habit.

Since then, she has donated blood 173 times. Ms Lau's most recent donation was on May 17.

In recognition of her contributions, she received the Medal for Life in 2022 from the Singapore Red Cross, the highest accolade for

donors who have achieved the milestone of 150 donations for women and 200 donations for men.

Ms Lau started off donating whole blood and, in 2007, she began apheresis blood donation. This allows donors to donate specific blood components, such as platelets and plasma, and can be done monthly. The interval for whole blood donations, on the other hand, is once every three months.

Whole blood donation is a 30-minute process, while apheresis blood donation takes about 1½ hours.

There have been times when she was rejected from donating blood because her haemoglobin levels were low. Haemoglobin is a protein found in red blood cells that carries oxygen in the body and gives blood its red colour.

To make sure she remains a suitable donor, Ms Lau eats iron-rich food such as curry and beef regularly, and takes iron tablets on alternate days.

"I want to keep up with my appointments for blood donation. It doesn't take a lot and is not difficult," she says.

Her 27-year-old son has donated blood thrice.

Ms Lau says: "It's a wonderful thing to give blood. It's also a testament to my good health, which I shouldn't take for granted."

DONATING WITHOUT HIS WIFE'S KNOWLEDGE

Mr Chua Teow Thong's blood donation journey started in 1961, when a friend playfully called him unfit and challenged him to give blood.

Mr Chua Teow Thong donated blood 55 times till age 60 without his wife's knowledge, until he received a certificate from the Ministry of Health recognising his efforts in 1991.



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on C2

Unable to donate? Help in other ways



FROM C1

Not wanting to back down, the then 24-year-old accepted the challenge.

"I immediately realised the life-saving impact of blood donation and thought this was a way I could give back to society. I don't have much when it comes to material things, and I believe it's a blessing to bless others with what you have," says Mr Chua. The 87-year-old retiree last worked as a dish collector at a food court.

He donated blood 55 times till the age of 60 without his wife's knowledge, until he received a certificate from the Ministry of Health recognising him for his efforts in 1991.

He felt there was no need to tell others about what he was doing.

"To me, the act of donating blood to help others is a personal choice fuelled by a willing heart. So, I didn't see a need to share it," says Mr Chua, who has a son in his 40s.

He was also worried that people might respond with discouraging remarks such as: "You're old and frail, and probably have a lack of blood. Why bother with blood donation? You are so skinny, are you sure you have enough blood?"

Although he is not afraid of needles, the sight of blood did make him weak initially. But after a couple of donations, he got used to it. Mr Chua urges people who are considering blood donation to cast aside their worries.

"Step forward with confidence and know that your kind deed is an

opportunity to become a hero in someone's life," he says.

BECOMING PASSIONATE ADVOCATES

At 1.5m and weighing 42kg, Ms Nithiya Ravindran is underweight and unable to donate blood. But she has been a passionate advocate for it and has organised blood donation drives with her sisters.

"I was inspired to do my part when I saw my two elder sisters and other family members donating blood. Though I have been unsuccessful in donating blood, I contribute in small ways, like managing the logistics of the drive and contacting sponsors for it," says the 18-year-old Raffles Institution student.

The Ravindran sisters have been championing blood donation since 2020, when they found out that blood supplies in Singapore were critically low in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Ms Nithiya, together with her sisters, Ms Nila, 21, and Ms Nithila, 19, sprang into action. They set up an Instagram page, @precious_drops, to organise biannual blood donation drives and garner as many donors as possible.

Since 2020, they have organised five blood donation drives at Bloodbank@HSA and Bloodbank@DhobyGhaut.

Ms Nithila, who is waiting to start her studies in social sciences at Singapore Management University, says it was tough getting people to sign up as some were scared of the process and many others could not meet the donation criteria, due to medication they were taking or medical conditions such as thalassemia.

People also had concerns that donating blood would increase their exposure to Covid-19, but debunking such myths helped those who were afraid, adds Ms Nithila.

Ms Nila, who is studying at the National University of Singapore Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, says it is heartening to see people setting aside time during the week-end to support the cause.

"Hearing stories of patients who are given a second chance in life through blood transfusions makes the experience a rewarding one," she adds.

Besides getting support from blood donors, the sisters also contacted volunteers and sponsors, such as Yakult and Scoopy's Gelateria, to bolster their outreach.

Ms Nila and Ms Nithila, who first donated blood in 2020, were quite fearful of "the large needles" at the start.

"We didn't know what to expect in terms of pain during our first time. However, the nurses were well qualified and able to take our blood effortlessly," says Ms Nila.

The three sisters have a goal of donating blood 30 times before the age of 30. Ms Nithiya is hoping to put on weight and donate blood for the first time in 2023. One needs to be at least 45kg to do so.

Ms Nila says: "We hope to make this practice a lifetime commitment because we believe there is nothing more gratifying than championing the gift of life."

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Misconceptions about blood donation

Mr Prakash Menon, group director of the Singapore Red Cross' blood donor programme, sheds light on four common misconceptions about blood donation.

1 Is blood donation very painful?

The needle prick feels like a pinch on the arm. A local anaesthetic will be administered by trained and competent staff to ensure you feel minimal pain during the donation.

2 Will I have enough blood if I donate?

Depending on the donor's weight, only 8 to 12 per cent of the body's total blood volume is collected.

With adequate hydration, the blood volume will return to normal in about three days. The body will replenish itself with fresh, new blood within a few weeks.

3 Can I donate blood if I have tattoos or body piercings?

If the tattoo or body piercing was done using sterile, single-use or disposable needles, you will be allowed to donate.

However, if you are unsure, you can donate three months after the last tattoo or body-piercing procedure.

4 Will I faint if I donate too much blood?

Blood donation is a very safe process. Side effects rarely happen during or after a donation. Most donors feel fine after donating blood as only 350 to 450ml of blood is collected, which is 8 to 12 per cent of the body's total blood volume.

Some donors may feel faint or light-headed due to the temporary lowering of blood pressure.

Donors can prevent this by making sure they are well-rested and have sufficient fluid before donation. Do not be in a rush to leave the blood donation centre. Donors who feel faint or light-headed are advised to lie down until they feel better.

(From left) Sisters Nithiya, Nila and Nithila Ravindran have been organising blood donation drives since 2020, when they found out that blood supplies in Singapore were critically low in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

SCAN TO WATCH

Being a blood donor: A step-by-step guide to donating



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