

Jehovah's witness: bleeding Rx

One of the Jehovah's Witnesses' more well known beliefs is their refusal of blood products. This stems from their literal interpretation of the Bible and Genesis 9:4, Leviticus 17:10, and Acts 15:29. Consequently, this patient population represents a special challenge requiring a thoughtful and multidisciplinary approach. Preparation for these patients begins well before the day of surgery and includes considerations such as iron and erythropoietin supplementation, surgical approach adjustment (e.g. minimally invasive, endovascular, staged), and medical therapy (e.g. radiation) over surgical treatment.

Day of surgery, in addition to ensuring optimization for the planned procedure, it is imperative that you have a thorough discussion with the patient regarding what blood products the patient will and will not accept. Whole blood, packed red blood cells, fresh frozen plasma, and platelets are (near) universally not accepted. However, it can vary from patient to patient with regards to: cryoprecipitate, cell saver, recombinant factors, albumin, acute normovolemic hemodilution, dialysis, and ECMO¹. Although artificial oxygen carriers are still problematic and unapproved, Jehovah's Witnesses may benefit from their use if available. Some institutions may provide a church representative available to navigate these discussions and are a good resource, alternatively many patients will bring a church elder with them on the day of surgery.

Patients should also be queried a final time regarding their wishes away from family, friends, and church members who may exert undue pressure. During surgery there must be a strong across-the-drapes focus on preventing unnecessary blood loss including: excellent surgical technique, minimizing blood draws, tourniquet use, antifibrinolytic therapy, and cell salvage techniques (if acceptable to the patient).

Further Reading:

- Lawson T, Ralph C. Perioperative Jehovah's Witnesses: a review. *Br J Anaesth.* 2015 Nov;115(5):676-87. doi: 10.1093/bja/aev161. Epub 2015 Jun 11. Erratum in: *Br J Anaesth.* 2017 Nov 1;119(5):1071. Dosage error in article text. PMID: 26068896.
- Rashid M, Kromah F, Cooper C. Blood transfusion and alternatives in Jehovah's Witness patients. *Curr Opin Anaesthesiol.* 2021 Apr 1;34(2):125-130. doi: 10.1097/ACO.0000000000000961. PMID: 33577206.

¹This list does not include all potentially problematic situations and medications, but it is representative and is what I discuss in my personal practice. Patient history and the planned procedure may warrant additions to this list.