

# What Happens When You Donate Your Body to Science

Oh, the places you'll go!

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You know that it's possible to donate many of your organs after you've died. But did you know that you can actually donate your entire body to science? It's an option that's becoming a lot more mainstream, says Tim Christy, director of marketing at MedCure, an accredited whole-body donation program in the U.S. The most popular means of donating your body is by registering with an organization like MedCure or Science Care, both of which partner with medical schools, hospitals, and other research organizations to match donor bodies with research needs. While these organizations can't guarantee placement with one specific cause or hospital, there are some pretty crazy places your corpse can go after you've moved on to greener pastures. Read on to find out where exactly you could end up.

## You Could Go to Med School



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For first-year med students, a cadaver is the ultimate study buddy. “Essentially, it’s their first patient, and that’s an intimate relationship,” says Darren Salmi, M.D., clinical assistant professor in surgery and clinical anatomy at Stanford Medical School. “Having gone through medical school and knowing how important it was to learn from a body really shifted my perspective on whole-body donation,” says Salmi, who is registered as a whole-body donor himself. “It’s my opportunity to pay it forward and continue to teach after I’m gone.” The use of cadavers in medical school is truly for teaching purposes. Students dissect their way through the body, examining organs, blood vessels, and more. They’ll also learn about differences that can occur in individual bodies and how to make incisions and use sutures.

## You Could Be a Practice Dummy for Surgeons

Ever wonder how surgeons prepare for crazy complex surgeries? Like all things in in life, practice makes perfect, and oftentimes surgeons will hone their skills and learn new techniques by practicing on a dead body before they do so on the living (hey, it’s better if they mess up on them, right?). In this case, your body would be worked on by a fully-trained and licensed M.D., as opposed to being studied by students in med school. “[Surgical teams] may want to work with cadaveric tissue to perfect complex surgeries,” says Melinda Ellsworth, vice president of donor services at Science Care, the world’s largest accredited whole-body donation program.



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## You Could Play a Trauma Victim

In the ER, doctors have to be prepared for anything. Enter the donated trauma victim. “There’s a lot of really great technology and digital simulation that certainly aids in teaching, but it’s no substitute for the real thing,” says Salmi. “We’re not to the point where we can really capture the feel of real human tissue or how variable one patient is to the next.” MedCure has a



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few surgical training centers throughout the country where trauma doctors, paramedics, and other medical professionals can come to practice life-saving procedures on donated bodies. While trauma isn’t introduced to these bodies externally, says Christy, sometimes pressure will be introduced into the circulatory system so docs can practice opening up an obstructed airway. There are also organizations that are interested in simulating major disasters, says Christy. At MedCure’s training centers, a disaster-like environment can be simulated, and M.D.s can practice applying tourniquets, for example.

## You Could Be the Star of a Human Body Exhibit

If you want your bod to be on display, you’ll likely have to plan ahead. Most major whole-body donation programs can’t guarantee what cause a donated body will end up supporting, and organizations like Science Care and MedCure don’t work with exhibitions like Body Worlds or BODIES: The Exhibition. So if you’d like to see your body preserved until the end of time through plastination, the process of preservation developed by the people behind Body Worlds, you’ll have to opt in to this option specifically when you’re filling out your donation forms.



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## You Could Get Into R&D



The U.S. produces almost 40 percent of all medical devices, and whole-body donation programs like MedCure help to test new devices and surgical techniques aimed at reducing patient recovery time. Donated bodies are invaluable players for testing and training doctors. “Until the surgeons are able to actually use a new device [with a body] the company isn’t going to be able to sell it,” says Christy. “That’s where we come in.”

## You Could Be a Crash Test Dummy

Perhaps one of the more gruesome uses for whole-body donations, vehicle safety tests sometimes use human cadavers in lieu of crash test dummies. Although this has been a fairly standard practice since the 1930s and almost all modern safety features have been developed with the aid of donated bodies, we prefer to think only of the black and yellow dummies when we get behind the wheel.



## You Could Become an Army Cadaver



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For many service men and women, heading into danger zones is just part of another week on the job. So obviously, state-of-the-art gear and equipment is necessary for keeping our armed forces safe. But like auto-safety testing, a dummy only goes so far when it comes to trying out military gear—like boots designed to protect soldiers from landmines. Since the 1800s, the military has used cadavers to field test new gear on real human bodies. Gruesome? Maybe. Better safe than sorry? Definitely.

## You Could Go to the Farm

The forensic body farm, that is. Researchers at the University of Tennessee's Forensic Anthropology Center have been studying the way bodies decompose for decades. By mimicking the way that a body might be disposed of in a murder case (think shallow graves, car trunks, and concrete), researchers are able to better identify clues about how long a body has been dead, keeping fewer cases from going cold.



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