



## If NFL Players Can Get Paid, So Should Kidney Donors

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Over 100,000 Americans are on the waiting list to receive a kidney transplant. Their typical wait time is around five years. For some, it can be as much as a decade. For every year that passes, roughly 5,000-10,000 people die for want of a kidney. In spite of educational efforts to encourage more donations, the waiting list has doubled in size in the past ten years.

But it doesn't have to be this way. According to research by Stanford epidemiologist P.J. Held and his colleagues, a policy in which the government awards kidney donors \$45,000 would be enough to end the shortage and save thousands of lives. It would also relieve the thousands more who are kept alive on dialysis, a debilitating treatment that drains Medicare and costs taxpayers \$1.45 million per kidney recipient.

But under the National Organ Transplant Act, or NOTA, people are prohibited from selling their organs. In a 1983 hearing for the bill, the then-Congressman Al Gore gave the following testimony:

There is no need to risk the problems a for-profit organ procurement system conjures up...These proposals have only served to exploit the desperation of Americans who are pressed by the serious economic troubles our nation is experiencing. Selling a part of their body is not the answer to their problems, and it is not the answer for those awaiting transplants.”

During the law's passage, the Senate Human Resources and Labor Committee echoed Gore's concerns, stating that human body parts “should not be viewed as commodities.”

### **Professional Athletes Already Sell Their Bodies**

Many people agree with this position, including a majority of surgeons. But Duke University professors Phillip Cook and Kimberly Krawiec argue in the Cato Institute's *Regulation Magazine* that under this same reasoning NFL players shouldn't get paid either.

Consider the objection that paying kidney donors would exploit the poor. It's easily argued that the NFL does just that. In a 2016 Sports Illustrated survey of 51 Denver Broncos players, half reported growing up in either lower or lower-middle-class households. The amount of head trauma these players experience makes them twice as likely as the general population to develop early onset dementia and Alzheimer's.

The frequency at which football players experience these problems has led to over one hundred family members donating the brains of their deceased loved ones to learn the cause of their illness. In their book *Is There Life After Football?*, authors James Holstein, Richard Coonce, and George Jones find that of the 111 brains donated, 110 suffered deterioration from a disease known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). This deterioration is linked to depression, apathy, and memory loss. This sample size comprises 8.5 percent of the former NFL players who died during the period of donation. Given that the analysis relied on voluntary contributions, the actual percentage of players with CTE is likely much higher.

Even when players are lucky enough not to suffer from these devastating illnesses, most will experience a lifetime of physical pain, with 9 in 10 former NFL players feeling aches the moment they wake up. This pain lasts all day for most of them, impairing their ability to work.

Kidney donors on the other hand, rarely suffer any lifelong disabilities. While the loss of a kidney does increase a person's risk of end-stage renal disease, the odds of acquiring it are still at about 1 in 400. The risk of dying from surgical complications is even less likely at around 3 per every 10,000 operations. As Georgetown University Professor Peter Jaworski puts it, your odds of dying from donating your kidney are the same as dying on a 200-mile road trip.

### **Kidney Donors Are Better Protected Than NFL Players**

Even though the risks of donating a kidney are relatively negligible, kidney donors are far better protected than professional football players. While kidney donors must go through intensive medical and psychological screening and attend counseling before undergoing surgery, no such requirements exist for playing in the NFL. Furthermore, professional football players are given very little information about the risks of playing.

But even if they were fully informed, the immediate gratification of fame and wealth may cause them to overlook the dangers of playing professionally. Kidney donors, on the other hand, receive full disclosure about the risks and inconveniences of surgery. The fact that they will need to spend two days in the hospital after the operation and an additional two to eight weeks at home recovering nullifies most concerns that people will impulsively sell their kidneys for quick cash.

### **NFL Players Entertain People, Kidney Donors Save Them**

NFL players undergo extreme health risks for society's entertainment. Kidney donors assume minor health risks to save thousands from dying. Cook and Krawiec estimate that if the government gave \$45,000 to kidney donors, the net present value for all the lives saved, suffering from dialysis eliminated, and taxpayer savings would exceed 1.3 trillion.

Paying people for their organs may seem strange or even disgusting, but the things that elicit our disgust are usually pretty arbitrary. Jason Brennan and Peter Jaworski point out in their book, *Markets Without Limits*, that at different points in history people found it repulsive to pay teachers, singers, and, yes, even athletes. Today, payment for all these activities are perfectly acceptable. Let us overcome our disgust once more because this time, thousands of lives are at stake.