

UW-Health: COVID-19 pandemic accelerated blood supply crisis

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MADISON, Wis. – Hospital systems around the state and country face a shortage of blood as the number of patients filling hospital beds ballooned.

The pandemic forced people to work from home and businesses to close, and schools to limit activities, which restricted access to people to participate in blood drives. Concurrently, the lack of labor to carry out the drives curtailed the ability to collect blood, in addition to the shortage of workers to transport the blood across the country.

There has been a 10% decline in blood donation since March 2020, and a 62% drop in college and high school blood drives due to the pandemic, which made up about up 25% of all donors in 2019, according to the American Red Cross's website. The American Red Cross provides about 40% of the United States blood supply.

This scenario has forced hospitals to tightly monitor blood use in the event blood supplies drop off, according to Dr. Ann O' Rourke, surgeon, UW Health, and associate professor of surgery, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.

"We've seen low supplies of blood for some time now, occasionally reaching levels we would consider dangerously low," she said. "The pandemic has thrown a roadblock in our ability to collect blood for needed medical procedures and emergency situations."

All blood types are needed, but Type O-positive, Type O-negative and platelets are of the most need, according to the American Red Cross.

The recent surge in COVID-19 hospitalizations and the increased severity of care for

non-COVID hospital patients have also stretched the blood supply to its limit, O' Rourke said.

"It's a double-whammy; low supply and high demand," she said. "We need people to get out and donate blood to ensure that there is blood for you when you need it."

To find a place to donate near you, visit the American Red Cross website, and click on "Donate Blood."

O' Rourke is available for interviews today, and a recorded interview is also available.