

New Transplant Technology Keeps Organs 'Alive' Outside Body

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In every medical drama the scene is the same: The surgeon carefully places the delicate organ in a cooler filled with ice and snaps the lid shut. The transplant team then sprints toward the door, hoping to reach its patient in time.

That speed isn't just for dramatic effect. Transplant teams rush because they have less than eight hours to transport the organ to the operating room, prepare it for surgery and implant it into the recipient's body.

"Beyond that time, there is significant injury to the (organ), which makes it unusable," said Dr. Abbas Ardehali, director of UCLA's heart and lung transplant program.

Placing healthy organs in the same container we use to keep soda cold at a picnic seems archaic. But until recently, it was the only option hospitals had.

That changed with heart-in-a-box.

In 2006, surgeons in Europe transplanted the first heart using the TransMedics Organ Care System, a portable device that kept the heart "alive" -- beating, with blood and oxygen flowing through it -- during transport. In 2011, doctors began successfully transplanting lungs using a similar device.

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