Patient & Family Guide
2025

Sepsis

SEPSIS
TIME IS ORGAN

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Sepsis

What is sepsis?

- Sepsis is when your body has a severe (very bad) response to an infection caused by bacteria or other germs.
- **Sepsis is very serious.** It can damage your organs and even cause death.
  - If sepsis is not treated, it can lead to a condition called **septic shock**. **This is a medical emergency.**
  - **Septic shock can cause death.**

What causes sepsis?

- When your immune system tries to fight the bacteria caused by an infection, it can also damage healthy tissues and organs.
- Sepsis can happen with an infection anywhere in the body, including:
  - Bladder infection (like a urinary tract infection [UTI])
  - Blood infection
  - Bone infection
  - Brain infection (like meningitis)
  - Gallbladder infection

- Liver infection
- Lung infection (like pneumonia)
- Skin infection (like cellulitis or an infection from a pressure injury [bedsore])

Who can get sepsis?

Anyone can get sepsis. **You are at a higher risk for sepsis if you:**

- Are very young (babies)
- Are 65 years old or older
- Have recently had surgery
- Have pressure injuries
- Have a chronic (ongoing) illness (like HIV, diabetes, cancer, kidney disease, or liver disease)
- Are immunocompromised (your immune system is less able to fight off infections), or if you are having chemotherapy, or using steroids
- Use intravenous (I.V.) drugs
- Have an alcohol use disorder
- Have obesity (very overweight)
- Use an invasive (inside the body) device (like an I.V. line, a central line, or a Foley catheter [a flexible tube in your bladder to help you pee])

Symptoms of sepsis can include:

- A low (less than 36 °C) or high (above 38 °C) body temperature (fever)
- Chills
- Sweating or clammy skin
- Fast breathing or heart rate
- Trouble breathing
- Severe fatigue (tiredness) or weakness
- Muscle aches or severe pain
- Changes in your level of consciousness (like being confused, agitated, or sleepy, falling, or losing bladder or bowel control [not being able to control when you pee or poop])
- An infection that is getting worse (you have more redness, swelling, discharge [pus], pain, coughing, sputum, wheezing or trouble breathing, burning or urgency when you pee, cloudy or bad-smelling pee, bloating, vomiting [throwing up], or diarrhea [loose, watery poop])
- Feeling worse after surgery

If you have any of these symptoms, call 911 or go to the nearest Emergency Department right away.

If sepsis is not treated, it can lead to septic shock. This is a medical emergency.

How is sepsis diagnosed?

- A health care provider will check your:
  - Vital signs (like breathing, heart rate, temperature, blood pressure)
  - Level of consciousness
  - Recent medical history, including past infections or suspected infections
- You may need:
  - Blood tests
  - An X-ray or a CT scan
  - A urine (pee) test

How is sepsis treated?

- **Sepsis must be treated right away.** You will likely be admitted to the hospital.
- Some people with sepsis are admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU).
- Sepsis may be treated with:
  - Antibiotic medication
  - I.V. fluids
  - Medication to improve your blood pressure and blood flow

- If you have sepsis, you will likely need:
  - Close monitoring
  - A Foley catheter to measure how much urine you pee and how well your kidneys are working
  - Blood tests

Post-sepsis syndrome

- Up to 50% (half) of sepsis survivors also have a condition called **post-sepsis syndrome**.
- This condition is often caused by sepsis complications (like poor blood circulation [flow], blood clots, or lung or organ damage).
- Post-sepsis syndrome can have long-term effects on your physical and mental health.

Physical symptoms of post-sepsis syndrome include:

- Trouble breathing
- Fatigue (tiredness)
- Trouble sleeping
- Muscle and joint pain
- Lower organ function (your organs do not work as well)
- Repeat infections (especially during the weeks or months after sepsis)

Mental health symptoms of post-sepsis syndrome include:

- Hallucinations (hearing or seeing things that are not real)
- Panic attacks
- Nightmares
- Memory loss
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Depression

How can I lower my risk of sepsis?

- Make sure you have had all of the recommended vaccines for your age.
- Lower your risk of infection by washing your hands often when you are in a hospital or a clinic.
- Always follow your health care provider's instructions.
- Know the signs and symptoms of infection and get help right away, if needed.

What are your questions?

Please ask a member of your health care team. We are here to help you.

Notes:

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:
www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:
Call 811 or visit: https://811.novascotia.ca

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