

## Infection Prevention and Control

# Sepsis: information for patients and relatives following a suspected or confirmed sepsis diagnosis

### What is sepsis?

**Sepsis is when the body's immune system overreacts to an infection.** The immune system usually helps fight off infection. The overreaction causes damage to the body's organs and tissues.

Sepsis was once called septicaemia or blood poisoning.

Sepsis is not rare, but it can be difficult to spot. Sepsis can move from a mild illness to a serious one very quickly. This is frightening for patients and their families.

### Why does sepsis happen?

We do not yet understand why the body sometimes overreacts to infection and develops sepsis. Much research is being done to improve our knowledge.

Most cases of sepsis are caused by bacteria we meet every day that do not usually make us ill. Infection can start anywhere in the body, including:

- a urine infection
- a chest infection
- an infected cut or bite, or any wound



## Patient Information

### **Who is at risk of getting sepsis?**

Often people who develop sepsis are in good health and do not have any other conditions. However, you are more likely to develop sepsis if you:

- are very young or very old
- are a person who has diabetes
- are pregnant or have just given birth
- have had an organ transplant and are on anti-rejection medications
- have a serious illness or take medication which affects the immune system
- have an infection or complication after an operation
- are on long-term steroids or on medication to treat cancer (chemotherapy)

### **What sepsis does to your body**

At first, sepsis often feels like flu. However, people with sepsis become ill very quickly.

Sepsis can make blood pressure drop because arteries and veins become larger. This means blood has a bigger space to fill, so the body may struggle to keep blood pressure at a normal level.

You may have had symptoms such as:

- feeling very cold and shivery
- feeling very hot and looking flushed
- a high temperature
- aching muscles
- feeling very tired
- sickness and/or diarrhoea
- not feeling like eating
- seeming confused or drunk or having slurred speech
- your heart may have tried to help by beating faster
- you may have felt breathless or noticed you were breathing more quickly

## Patient Information

- you may have noticed changes to your skin. It may have been cold and pale with a mottled appearance, or your skin could have become hot and flushed

You may have been cared for in the Critical Care Unit in hospital if your condition worsened.

### **What treatment you might have had**

- Sepsis is treated by giving medications to help beat your infection. These medications include antibiotics, antifungals, or antivirals. This depends on what caused your infection.
- Treatment to support your body's organs until they began to recover. This may have included:
  - providing you with oxygen to help you breathe
  - giving you fluid or medications to help maintain normal blood pressure and protect your organs
  - your organs may have needed additional support. For example, your kidneys may have been supported by a dialysis machine

### **Post-sepsis syndrome (PSS)**

Recovery after sepsis varies for each person. They can experience a range of physical, cognitive, and psychological symptoms. This is known as post-sepsis syndrome (PSS). Reported symptoms include:

- tiredness
- muscle weakness
- difficulty concentrating
- low mood
- anxiety
- joint pain

You can find a more detailed list and further information on PSS on the UK Sepsis Trust's Website:

<https://sepsistrust.org/get-support/support/support-for-survivors/post-sepsis-syndrome/>

## Patient Information

### Post-sepsis support

We are here to support you as you recover.

If you or a loved one has had sepsis, the UK Sepsis Trust also offers online resources. These include support groups and Facebook groups. You can find more details here:

0808 800 0029

[support@sepsistrust.org](mailto:support@sepsistrust.org).

<https://sepsistrust.org/get-support/resources/>

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format, please contact 024 7696 5132 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke-free policy.

### Did we get it right?

We would like you to tell us what you think about our services. This helps us make further improvements and recognise members of staff who provide a good service.

Have your say. Scan the QR code or visit:

[www.uhcw.nhs.uk/feedback](http://www.uhcw.nhs.uk/feedback)



#### Document History

Department:	Infection Prevention and Control
Contact:	25132
Updated:	September 2023
Review:	September 2025
Version:	3
Reference:	HIC/LFT/2176/17