

# Sepsis

## What is sepsis?

Sepsis is a life-threatening illness caused by the body's reaction to a severe infection. Sepsis is a medical emergency and needs immediate treatment.

Sepsis happens when the body is fighting an infection. Sepsis can damage many parts of the body and can even cause death. The best chance of getting better from sepsis is to treat it quickly.

Anyone can get sepsis, across the world, 40% of all sepsis cases are in children under 5. However, some children at greater risk of developing sepsis include:

- Young children, babies and newborns.
- Children with chronic diseases like diabetes, kidney, liver or heart disease.
- Children with a low immune system, including those receiving chemotherapy or long-term steroids.
- Children who are too young to have received all their immunisations, unimmunised children or those with incomplete immunisations.
- Children with medical devices in their body including central venous access devices.
- Children who have had surgery, burns or wounds recently.
- Children who have had sepsis before.
- Children from rural and remote areas who live long distances from healthcare services.

## Prevention of sepsis

The best way to protect your child from sepsis is to prevent and manage treatable infections promptly (many viral illnesses are not treatable).

You can help prevent infections by:

- Supporting your child to take care with basic hygiene and keeping their body and hands clean.
- Keep up to date with your child's vaccinations (including COVID-19 and influenza) to prevent infections.
- Keep insect bites, wounds and skin injuries clean and covered and see a doctor if they are not healing, or become red, hot or inflamed.
- If an infection occurs, visit your doctor and ensure that your child takes any medicines prescribed as directed.
- Let healthcare providers know of your child's past sepsis diagnosis if you go to hospital or to see a doctor.
- Be aware of the early symptoms of sepsis, and do not hesitate to call an ambulance if you are concerned about sepsis.



## Early signs of sepsis

Knowing if your child has sepsis is tricky because many of the initial symptoms of sepsis are like those seen in common mild infections, such as a tummy bug or the common cold and flu.

The difference with sepsis is that your child will become more severely ill.

Signs of sepsis include:

- fast breathing or long pauses in breathing
- skin that feels abnormally cold to touch
- very blotchy, blue or pale skin
- a rash that doesn't fade when pressed (glass test)
- drowsiness, confusion or difficulty waking your child
- restlessness or floppy limbs
- fits, seizures or convulsions
- a lot of pain or very restless
- vomiting
- infrequent wet nappies or low urine output.

**If your child seems sicker than normal to you trust your gut, seek urgent medical attention and ask the question “Could it be sepsis?”.**

## How is sepsis treated?

Early treatment saves lives, sepsis can be cured if treated quickly.

If your child is admitted to the hospital with sepsis:

- The doctors and nurse examine your child and that their vital signs to identify potential sources of infection and determine whether sepsis is present.
- Your child will get an intravenous cannula so blood tests can be taken and medicines and fluids can be given.
- Blood tests will include blood cultures.
- Medicines will include antibiotics to help treat the infection.
- Intravenous fluids and other medicines may be given to support your child.
- Surgery may be needed.
- If your child is very sick they may need to stay in the intensive care unit for specialist care and treatment.

Your healthcare team should talk to you throughout your child's admission about:

- What a diagnosis of sepsis means for your child in the short, medium and longer terms.
- Plans for your child's treatment during the hospital stay and who will provide this care.
- What to expect as your child recovers in hospital after the initial primary care for sepsis.
- How you can tell someone whenever you are concerned.

Dealing with a complex health issue like sepsis can be stressful and challenging. Let your healthcare team know if you or a family member need some support, such as a social worker.

## What information should you expect at discharge from hospital?

- A discharge letter.
- Recovery goals and clear instructions about follow-up plans with health professionals, including your local doctor, after discharge from hospital.
- The medicines your child needs to take after discharge.
- The signs that your child's condition is getting worse or relapsing and what to do if you are concerned.
- The need to prevent infection and simple ways to reduce the likelihood of infection or sepsis coming back.
- Potential long-lasting effects of sepsis, and the management your child will need after leaving hospital.



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