



Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Sepsis

**Information for you and
those supporting you**



Sepsis is a life threatening condition that can develop when your body's response to an infection starts to cause damage to your tissues and organs.

This leaflet has been written to give you information about sepsis. Please speak to your doctor if you still have questions or need more advice.

What is sepsis?

Sepsis is also known as septicaemia or blood poisoning. It can develop when the body over-responds to a bad infection, causing it to attack its own tissues and organs. This can make you very ill.

The majority of people who develop sepsis recover after being given a course of antibiotics. However, if your immune system is weak or the infection is particularly severe, it can cause problems with one or more of your body's organs. This may include very low blood pressure or kidney failure.

Some people develop such severe sepsis that it may be life threatening. If this happens, you will need to be cared for in the Critical Care Unit.

Fortunately, most people who develop sepsis recover, although recovery is different for everyone and it may take some time to feel completely back to normal.

Sepsis can develop quickly, which can be frightening for both the person it is happening to and their friends, relatives and carers.

Symptoms of sepsis:

- high or low body temperature (above 38°C or below 36°C)
- extreme shivering or shaking
- fast heartbeat or breathing
- feeling dizzy or faint, or losing consciousness
- a change in mental state (for example, confusion or disorientation)
- diarrhoea
- feeling or being sick
- slurred speech
- severe muscle pain
- breathlessness
- reduced urine production
- cold, clammy and pale or mottled skin.

How is sepsis treated?

If sepsis is spotted early, treatment is relatively simple and can be life-saving. It usually starts with being given antibiotics.

You may also need to be given medication to treat low blood pressure, or oxygen if your oxygen levels are low.

Blood tests, and other tests like X-rays, will be carried out to look for the cause of the infection and the effect it might be having on your organs.

We also monitor how much urine you produce, as sepsis can cause kidney damage. To help with this, we may fit you with a urinary catheter. This is a thin, flexible tube, which is inserted into your bladder to drain urine.

What if I have to go to the Critical Care Unit?

The Critical Care Unit (also known as Intensive Care) is where people are treated and nursed if they need additional support. This might include help with breathing, dialysis to support kidney function, or medication to control blood pressure or heart rate. These types of treatments require closer monitoring than can be given on a normal ward.

People who have been in Critical Care may only remember bits of their time there. This may be due to being so unwell and also due to medications. It can be helpful if family members or friends keep a diary, to help fill in memory gaps and answer any questions about what has been happening.

Support and further information is available from ICUsteps. This is a support group for people who have been affected by critical illness.

Website: **www.icusteps.org**

Tel: **0300 30 20 121**

What can relatives or friends do to help?

If you develop sepsis, your family and friends will have an important role in helping you to recover. Just having them with you, giving encouragement and reassurance, can help your recovery.

It is common for people with sepsis to get confused. Familiar things from home, such as photos, music or books, may help.

Your visitors might want to brush your hair or help you eat or drink. If your hands or feet feel swollen or heavy, a hand or foot massage may help.

It is important that those people who are concerned about you remember to also look after themselves. It can be hard and very tiring to accompany someone you love or care for through an illness. They should eat properly, take breaks and rest when they can.

The nurses and doctors are there to help. If you, your family or your friends have questions or are unsure of anything, please ask.

Leaving hospital – what to expect

When you return home, you may still be very tired and feeling like you need to rest. You may be much weaker than before. Pushing yourself too hard may slow down your recovery. Set achievable goals and pace yourself.

Sepsis may take away your appetite. Try having small meals and healthy snacks, to build up your appetite and strength. Also, keep yourself hydrated by drinking plenty of fluids.

Your emotions may be very changeable. This is a normal response to how unwell you have been. Try talking to someone about your feelings, such as your family, friends or GP.

After a life-changing experience, your relationships with your family or friends may also have changed. You may feel they are over-protective. Remember, they watched anxiously while you were ill. This may have affected them more than you realise.

You may be worried about returning to work. You may want to ask your employer if you can start back part-time to begin with.

Remember, although recovery can be tough, there is every reason to be optimistic that you will get back to a more normal life in time.

Further information

For further support you may wish to join the local **Oxfordshire and Berkshire Sepsis Support Group**.

Tel: **0800 389 6255**

Email: **info@sepsistrust.org**

The **UK Sepsis Trust** also provides detailed information about sepsis, as well as a support line.

Website: **www.sepsistrust.org**

Tel: **0800 389 6255**

Email: **info@sepsistrust.org**

If you need an interpreter or would like this information leaflet in another format, such as Easy Read, large print, Braille, audio, electronically or another language, please speak to the department where you are being seen. You will find their contact details on your appointment letter.

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