What is Sepsis / Septic Shock?



What is Sepsis?

Sepsis is the body's reaction to severe infection. The body attacks its own organs and tissues, which can lead to shock, multiple organ failure and death. In many instances it can be prevented with timely appropriate treatment. It is vital to get early treatment if you think you, or a loved one, might be at affected.

How common is Sepsis?

Sepsis is very common, but is frequently just labelled as 'infection'. It is estimated to cause 46,000 – 67,000 deaths a year ***(sepsistrust.org)***. According to the HSE more people die of sepsis than lung cancer, breast cancer and HIV/AIDS combined ***(www.hse.ie)***. It is becoming more common as a result of:

- An increase in the number of patients with weakened immune systems
- Increased use of antibiotics leading to bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics
- People living longer

What causes it?

Sepsis can result from any kind of infection but most commonly develop from bacterial infections. Infected wounds, cellulitis, septic arthritis, meningitis, pneumonia, urinary tract infections, and post-operative infections can all lead to sepsis. Usually, the body identifies the infection and tries to eliminate the infection allowing the body to heal. However, when the local infection spreads throughout the body Sepsis develops.

Who is at risk?

The greatest risk factor is infection. Anyone can develop it but it is more likely to develop in:

- Infants and the elderly (over 75 or those who are very frail)

- People who have wounds or injuries from accidents or who have recently had surgery (in the last 6 weeks)
- Those with weakened immune systems or receiving treatments which weaken the immune system e.g., chemotherapy (cancer) treatment, patients without a spleen (due to splenectomy), people with sickle cell disease
- People with chronic illnesses such as diabetes
- People who are taking medications long-term for conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis

Signs and symptoms

Unfortunately, Sepsis can be hard to recognise at first as early symptoms are similar to flu and other common illnesses. This means that Sepsis is only diagnosed if infection is suspected or proven to be the cause of these signs. Early signs and symptoms include:

- High temperature greater than 38.3^{0}C
- Shivering fits and/or chills
- Fast heart rate, over 90 beats per minute (adults only)
- Fast breathing rate, over 20 breaths per minute (adults only)
- Confusion, especially in very old people
- Lethargy (weakness)
- Baby’s and young children may have poor feeding and may vomit repeatedly

Severe sepsis

If sepsis is not identified and treated in the early stages then sever sepsis might develop which will result in massive damage to the casualty. The body’s organs (e.g., liver, kidneys, heart) will become damaged and begin to shut down.

Septic Shock

This happens when the infection has reached the point where there is a life-threatening drop in blood flow to vital organs.

What are the signs of severe sepsis and septic shock?

- Obvious confusion
- Slurred speech
- Extreme weakness
- Not able to feed oneself
- Clammy, pale or blotchy skin
- Difficulty breathing
- Very fast heart rate
- A rash which doesn’t disappear when pressed on by a clear glass
- Adolescents may feel awful leg pain and may have difficulties standing
- Passing little or no urine, or passing very dark urine with a bad smell
- An impending sense of doom

Treatment & Prevention

Sepsis is a medical emergency. Early diagnosis and treatment significantly increases a person’s chances of survival. If you, or someone you look after has the signs and symptoms as listed above, call for medical help or go to your local Emergency department.

The chances of developing sepsis can be reduced by through good hygiene, by practicing basic first aid techniques when caring for minor cuts and scrapes and by keeping vaccinations up to date

About Us…

Donegal Safety Services provide a number of first aid training courses which you can ***view here***.

If you have any questions at all regarding any of our courses we would be delighted to hear from you. You can contact us by visiting our contact us page or by emailing us directly on info@donegalsafetyservices.ie

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Hope you enjoyed this article on Sepsis and how you can identify its signs and symptoms.