

A photograph of a pregnant woman in a white hospital gown, sitting and holding a brown teddy bear. The background is softly blurred, showing what appears to be a hospital room.

Pregnancy & Childbirth

Sepsis *and*

Although pregnancy is the same for women worldwide, their safety varies greatly depending on where the women live and the type of medical care they receive, if any. Sepsis is an illness that can develop in some pregnant women, as well as in women who have recently delivered a baby or babies.

Sepsis that occurs during pregnancy is called maternal sepsis. If it develops within six weeks of delivery, it is called postpartum sepsis or puerperal sepsis. Sometimes incorrectly called blood poisoning, sepsis is the body's often deadly inflammatory response to infection.

Maternal and postpartum sepsis are more common in developing countries, but they also strike women in the wealthier countries, including in the United States. In the mid-90s, sepsis was responsible for about 7.6% of maternal deaths in the U.S. A study published in October 2013 reported that severe sepsis and sepsis-related deaths are rising in the U.S. The study also reports that "Sepsis is currently the leading cause of direct maternal death in the United Kingdom." Worldwide, one-third of people who develop sepsis die. Many who do survive are left with life-changing effects, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), chronic pain and fatigue, organ dysfunction (organs don't work properly) and/or amputations.

WHY SEPSIS OCCURS

Sepsis can occur because of an infection related to the pregnancy or an unrelated one, such as pneumonia or a urinary tract infection (UTI). An article published by the American College of Emergency Physicians in 2012, said that women with maternal sepsis can make up as many as 30% of pregnancy-related sepsis cases admitted to intensive care units in countries like the U.S. The most common infections that triggered maternal sepsis were caused by bacteria such as E. coli.

Sepsis can develop as the result of many complications. Here are a few:

- **Miscarriages (spontaneous abortions) or induced abortions:** Infections are a risk after any miscarriage or abortion. Non-sterile abortions, those that may be done outside of a healthcare facility, are a particular risk. Women who have had one should watch for signs and symptoms of an infection.
- **Cesarean sections:** Sepsis can develop after any type of surgery. C-sections are major abdominal surgeries with all the associated risks.
- **Prolonged or obstructed labor:** An unusually long time of labor or labor that stops progressing.
- **Ruptured membranes:** The longer the period between the "water breaking" and the baby's birth, the higher the chance of an infection.
- **Infection following vaginal delivery:** Although not common in the developed world among women who give birth in healthcare facilities, infections are very common in the developing world.
- **Mastitis:** Infection in the breasts can trigger sepsis.

RISK GROUPS

Any woman who is pregnant, has miscarried or aborted, or who has delivered a child is at risk of developing maternal or postpartum sepsis. However, some women do have a higher risk than do others. This includes women who have a history of congestive heart failure, liver disease, or lupus, according to a report presented at the American Society of Anesthesiologists Meeting in 2012.

Women who may be more prone to getting an infection are those:

- With diabetes
- Who undergo invasive procedures to help them get pregnant
- Who undergo invasive tests during pregnancy

CHALLENGES IN DETECTING SEPSIS

Diagnosing sepsis in a pregnant woman or one who has recently given birth can be challenging. Pregnancy and delivery cause many changes in the body, including a faster heart beat, changes in blood pressure, and faster breathing. Usually, these are signs that may alert a healthcare provider that there may be something wrong, such as an infection. Also, many women get chills and sweat heavily after giving birth. They may also have pain, or feel dizzy or lightheaded.

It also may be more difficult to diagnose infections in pregnant and postpartum women. For example, urinary tract infections usually cause a frequent need to urinate, but this can happen because of pregnancy alone.

WHAT IS SEPSIS

SEPSIS is the body's overwhelming and life-threatening response to infection, which can lead to tissue damage, organ failure, and death.

What are the signs and symptoms of sepsis?

Sepsis is a toxic response to an infection. There is no single sign or symptom of sepsis. It is, rather, a combination of symptoms.

Sepsis symptoms can include ANY of the following:

- S** – Shivering, fever, or very cold
- E** – Extreme pain or general discomfort (“worst ever”)
- P** – Pale or discolored skin
- S** – Sleepy, difficult to rouse, confused
- I** – “I feel like I might die”
- S** – Short of breath

What should I do if I think a loved one or I have sepsis?

SEPSIS IS A MEDICAL EMERGENCY

IF YOU SUSPECT SEPSIS, CALL 9-1-1 OR GO TO A HOSPITAL

To learn more about sepsis, or to read tributes and survivor stories, visit us online at Sepsis.org



SEPSIS ALLIANCE

Suspect Sepsis. Save Lives.™

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