



Sepsis *and* Aging

Sepsis can and does affect people of all ages. However, more than 80% of sepsis cases occur among people aged 50 years and older.

Often incorrectly called blood poisoning, sepsis is the body's often deadly response to infection. Sepsis kills and disables millions and requires early suspicion and rapid treatment for survival. If left untreated, sepsis can progress to septic shock and death. Worldwide, one-third of people who develop sepsis die. Many who do survive are left with a number of physical and psychological problems, such as amputations, chronic pain, post-traumatic stress disorder, and more. This is post-sepsis syndrome (PSS).

HOW DOES SEPSIS OCCUR?

As people age, they may develop chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, kidney disease, or heart failure. It's not unusual to see someone with two or more chronic diseases. Diseases such as cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), hypertension, liver cirrhosis, and HIV are common conditions among people who have sepsis.

Any type of infection can cause sepsis, from the flu to an infected bug bite. The most common infections that trigger sepsis among older people

are pneumonia and urinary tract infections (UTIs). Infections can also happen through abscessed teeth or sores on the skin, either from a simple skin tear because the skin may be dry or fragile, or a pressure sore from sitting in a wheelchair or lying in bed.

It's not always easy to spot infections among older people. For example, symptoms of a UTI usually include frequent urination, burning or pain while urinating, and cloudy and foul-smelling urine. For many seniors though, the first sign of a UTI is a change in mental status — they become confused or disoriented.

WHY IS SEPSIS SO SERIOUS?

Sepsis is a very serious illness for anyone at any age, but it can be particularly devastating for seniors. According to a study published in 2010, older severe sepsis survivors were more than three times more likely to see a drop in cognitive (mental) abilities after having sepsis. This can make it impossible for them to return to their previous living arrangements and often results in admission into a long-term healthcare facility. As well, the risk of dying from septic shock rises as you get older.

Sepsis also doesn't affect just the patient, researchers have discovered. A study published in 2012 found that wives of older sepsis survivors had a three to four times higher risk of depression than average.

SEPSIS TREATMENT

Sepsis must be suspected, recognized, and treated quickly. Every hour that sepsis is not treated, the risk of death increases.

Treatment is with IV fluids and antibiotics. Other medications, such as those to raise blood pressure may be needed. If someone you know is admitted to an intensive care unit (ICU), you may see many machines used to monitor various things, such as body function (heart rate, blood pressure), medications and IV fluids that are being administered, and perhaps a ventilator to help the patient breathe.

SEPSIS PREVENTION

The key to preventing sepsis is to prevent an infection from occurring in the first place. If an infection does set in, it must be treated as quickly and effectively as possible.

Many illnesses can be and are prevented through regular vaccinations, such as for the flu or pneumonia. The risk of getting an infection also drops with proper hand washing.

Infections can also be reduced by proper care of all wounds, even the smallest scrape or cut. A thorough cleaning with soap and water will help remove bacteria at the wound opening.

Any infection should be taken seriously. Do not hope it will go away. Action must be taken.

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. 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

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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