

Sepsis: Spotting the Silent Killer Early

As we enter the season for coughs, colds, and other winter viruses, it's especially important to be aware of how infections can sometimes become much more serious. One condition we all need to be aware of is sepsis.

We've all heard of and suffered through infections — a sore throat, a chest infection, maybe a wound that gets a bit red and sore. Most of the time, these get better with simple treatment. But sometimes, an infection can trigger something far more serious called sepsis.

As your GP, I want to help you understand what sepsis is, why it's so dangerous, and — most importantly — how to spot the warning signs early.

What Is Sepsis?

Sepsis is the body's overreaction to an infection. Normally, your immune system fights germs and helps you heal. But with sepsis, the immune system goes into overdrive and starts attacking your own tissues and organs.

If it isn't recognised and treated quickly, sepsis can cause organ failure and even be life-threatening. The good news is that *early treatment saves lives*.

Who Can Get Sepsis?

Anyone can develop sepsis, but some people are more at risk, including:

- Babies and young children
- Older adults (especially over 65)
- People with weakened immune systems (for example, due to cancer treatment or long-term illness)
- Those who have recently had surgery or a wound
- People with long-term health conditions such as diabetes or kidney disease

Signs and Symptoms to Watch For

Sepsis can start with any kind of infection — chest, urine, skin, or even something minor like a cut or sore throat. If you, or someone you're caring for, has an infection and feels extremely unwell, it's important to think about sepsis.

Look out for these key warning signs:

In Adults:

- Slurred speech or confusion
- Extreme shivering or muscle pain
- Passing little or no urine
- Severe breathlessness
- Skin that's mottled, bluish, or very pale
- A feeling that "something is very wrong"

In Children:

- Breathing very fast
- Has a fit or convulsion
- Looks mottled, bluish, or pale
- Feels abnormally cold to touch
- Is very lethargic or difficult to wake
- Has a rash that doesn't fade when you press it

If your child is under 5 and not feeding, vomiting repeatedly, or hasn't had a wee for 12 hours, that can also be a warning sign.

What Should You Do?

If you suspect sepsis, don't wait. Call 999 or go to A&E immediately and tell them you're worried about sepsis. If you're unsure but concerned, contact your GP or NHS 111 for urgent advice.

Trust your instincts — if someone looks very unwell or is deteriorating quickly, it's always better to get checked.

Can Sepsis Be Prevented?

While not all cases can be avoided, you can reduce your risk by:

- Keeping up to date with vaccinations (like flu and pneumonia)
- Treating infections promptly
- Practising good hygiene (handwashing and wound care)
- Seeking medical advice if an infection isn't improving

The Bottom Line

Sepsis is serious, but with quick action, people can and do recover fully. The key is knowing the signs and trusting your gut when something doesn't feel right.

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