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Health Quality &
Safety Commission
Te Tāhū Hauora



Sepsis
Trust NZ

Could it be sepsis?

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Transcriber's Note: The logo at the top of the page is:
Health Quality & Safety Commission, Te Tāhū Hauora. The
logo below it is Sepsis Trust NZ.

Could it be sepsis?

What is sepsis?

It happens when your immune system responds to an infection in an extreme (dysregulated) and toxic way, injuring tissue and organs. It can be the result of any type of underlying infection for example, from bacterial, virus or fungal infections.

Sepsis occurs when your body's immune system—which normally helps us fight infection—overreacts, causing damage to tissues and organs. It can cause life-threatening changes to your body.

It can put stress on or damage your organs, for example, blood vessels, skin, lungs, heart, kidneys, and brain.

It can also cause damage to your body's internal systems. For example, your nervous system.

Sepsis is not an infection. It is an inappropriate and dangerous response of your immune system.

What causes sepsis?

Our body's natural defense systems and immune system fight these infections, often without any need to visit the GP or hospital. However sometimes, the body's immune system—which normally helps us fight infection—overreacts, causing damage to tissues and organs.

Some people are more at risk of sepsis

Sepsis can affect anyone, but some people are more at risk than others.

- Young people under the age of 12, especially babies and children who are not fully immunised.
- People over the age of 60 years.
- Pregnant or recently pregnant women/wāhine (including after giving birth, or after an abortion or miscarriage).
- Māori or Pacific peoples, especially those who are younger.
- People who have had sepsis before.
- People recently discharged from hospital.
- People with chronic diseases or who are immunocompromised.

What does sepsis look like and what are the common signs and symptoms?

Sepsis can develop quickly. Sometimes the early signs can be hard to recognise. The earlier sepsis is identified the better the chances of minimising harm.

Common signs of sepsis include:

- feeling cold and shivery
- feeling hot and flushed
- skin is blotchy
- difficulty breathing
- aching muscles
- very tired
- not wanting to eat
- an upset stomach, perhaps vomiting or diarrhoea
- not passing urine for 12 hours or more, or passing very little
- showing signs of confusion, unusual behaviour or slurred speech.

If you are measuring body temperature it could be either very high OR very low. Both can indicate infection and sepsis.

If you think someone might have an infection and has any of these symptoms, seek help and ask: Could it be sepsis?

What happens to the body

- Blood pressure might drop because the immune response causes your veins and arteries (blood vessels) to dilate (widen) and fluid shifts into surrounding tissue and organs.
- The heart will have to work harder and beat faster because of the dilated vessels. When the heart is

working harder some people will feel short of breath or will be breathing faster.

- Skin may become cool or pale. Sometimes the skin will look blotchy, be an unusual color or there may be a rash.
- Sometimes the skin can feel hot and flushed.
- Some people might become drowsy or confused. This can be from dangerously low blood pressure not getting enough blood to the brain or the toxic effects of the sepsis.

Sepsis is a medical emergency

Depending on the underlying infection, there may be other symptoms, for example, a bad cough.

Sometimes symptoms are not very specific and could be described as "feeling generally unwell".

As sepsis progresses urgent treatment in hospital is needed.

You can find more information about sepsis in other resources called:

- In hospital with sepsis
- Recovering from sepsis

You can find both of these resources in alternate formats on the Health Quality & Safety Commission website:

<https://www.hqsc.govt.nz/our-work/improved-service->

[delivery/sepsis/sepsis-resources-for-patients-and-whanau/](#)
or at the shortened URL: <https://hqsc-sepsis-whanau>.

End of Could it be sepsis?