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Health Quality &  
Safety Commission  
Te Tāhū Hauora



Sepsis  
Trust NZ

# Recovering from 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.

# Recovering from sepsis

What happens after you have had 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.

Around half of sepsis survivors make a full recovery within a few weeks or maybe months. But some will experience Post Sepsis Syndrome (PSS).

PSS describes ongoing complications that are a result of the sepsis, the underlying infection or treatment you've had, or maybe a combination of these. PSS is broadly

described as changes to your cognitive and physical function, and medical and psychological complications.

PSS symptoms can vary. You may be faced with new, longer-term medical conditions or chronic conditions you may have had before the sepsis that gets worse.

For most people the average recovery time from PSS is up to two years.

PSS does not only affect people who spent time in ICU.

It is common to become aware of PSS symptoms after you get home from hospital.

You might notice some physical and emotional changes while you are recovering from sepsis:

- general and extreme weakness
- tiredness
- breathlessness
- body aches and pains
- weight loss, lack of appetite or food not tasting the way it used to
- dry, itchy or flaky skin
- hair loss
- brittle nails and teeth
- dizziness, headaches
- change in vision

- sensitive to temperature changes or easily become cold or hot
- intolerance to environmental changes, noises or stimuli, for example, loud or busy spaces, too much happening
- repeated infections.

If any of these symptoms persist or are worsening, it could be the physical or medical features of PSS. You should talk to your doctor or nurse.

You may also experience these feelings after you get home:

- mood swings
- anxiety or depression
- feeling unmotivated
- lack of confidence or self-belief
- not caring about how you look
- wanting to be alone and isolating from loved ones
- flashbacks or bad memories, or if memories are not clear, perhaps bad feelings associated with the memory
- confusing reality (what is real and not)
- poor concentration or problems with retaining and processing information
- frustration at not being "back to your normal self"

- guilt and stress about the worry whānau have through supporting you
- feeling that nobody understands how you are feeling.

If any of these persist or are worsening, it could be the psychological or cognitive features of PSS. It is advised to see a health care professional to discuss.

Sepsis is associated with a high rate of longer-term psychological harm, for example acute stress disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

It is advised to seek help early to get the support you need.

## **Recovering at home**

Understanding your sepsis diagnosis is important to help understand challenges with recovery, if there are any.

Recovery from sepsis is more than recovery from an infection, surgery or a long stay in hospital. Recovery can be different for everyone going through it and can take longer than expected.

Some people might suffer from ongoing problems. Talking to your doctor or nurse about specific concerns can be helpful. They may be able to help you seek support or treatment from other community health care providers.

Support might be needed from, for example, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, psychologists or counsellors or other medical specialists.

Some survivors might want therapy or support from rongoā Māori practitioners, religious or cultural leaders. Sharing this information might help them plan care with you to best support your recovery.

Sometimes seeing or measuring your recovery can be hard. Especially if it is slow. Here are some activities that can help.

- Keep a journal of what is troubling you. For example, if it is poor concentration try doing an activity that can easily be repeated, maybe a word puzzle. Document once a week how you find doing this activity, for example, is it getting easier? Can you concentrate on it for longer? Over time, you will see how progress is going. Or if there is no progress, then you can let whoever is helping you know this.
- If your physical strength is poor, try doing an activity you can repeat. Perhaps a walk around the block. Over time you will see if your strength and ease of the activity is improving or not.

Sepsis and recovery can affect the whole whānau. When a loved one is home, you might feel very relieved that they are out of hospital or be anxious about the responsibility of caring for them.

It is common for those closest to a sepsis survivor, including children, to experience some emotional effects, including children. You or other members of your whānau

may feel upset, tearful or anxious, depressed or just very tired.

It is important to take care of yourself. Take time out for yourself, talk about how you are feeling, eat well and get plenty of sleep. And don't be afraid to ask for help.

If you or any member of your whānau are struggling to cope or have questions, you can ask for help and support from your GP. You can also use the resources below:

Need to talk? Text 1737

Sepsis Trust NZ [www.sepsis.org.nz](http://www.sepsis.org.nz)

Sepsis Australia [www.australiansepsisnetwork.net.au](http://www.australiansepsisnetwork.net.au)

Youthline [youthline.co.nz/helpline](http://youthline.co.nz/helpline)

Healthline [www.healthy.org.nz/health advice](http://www.healthy.org.nz/health%20advice)

Yellow Brick Road: Supporting families towards mental wellbeing [yellowbrickroad.org.nz/mental wellbeing](http://yellowbrickroad.org.nz/mental%20wellbeing)

Australian and New Zealand Intensive Care Society (ANZICS) [www.anzics.org/information/my life after ICU](http://www.anzics.org/information/my%20life%20after%20ICU)

Health Quality & Safety Commission Te Tāhū Haoura: Sepsis [www.hqsc.govt.nz/our-work/sepsis](http://www.hqsc.govt.nz/our-work/sepsis)

## More information

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

- Could it be sepsis
- In hospital with 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 Recovering from sepsis**