

## SEPSIS ADVOCACY RESOURCE:

### Key messages to select, share and strengthen awareness

*This resource supports advocacy efforts by providing clear, adaptable information on sepsis. It includes key facts, narratives, and messaging, allowing advocates to select and tailor content to their needs. Designed for accuracy and clarity, it helps advocates communicate effectively and drive awareness.*

## Sepsis Definitions and Alternatives

### Short definition

Sepsis is the body's life-threatening, uncontrolled immune response to an infection.

### Long definition

Sepsis is a life-threatening uncontrolled immune response to an infection, causing the body to damage its own tissues and organs. Sepsis can be triggered by any type of infection, whether bacterial, viral, fungal, or caused by other germs (pathogens).

### Comprehensive definition

Sepsis is a life-threatening uncontrolled immune response to an infection, causing the body to damage its own tissues and organs. Sepsis can be triggered by any type of infection, whether bacterial, viral, fungal, or caused by other germs (pathogens). Sepsis needs urgent and quick treatment with antibiotics, intravenous fluids and other supportive measures.

### Who is at risk of sepsis

Anyone is at risk of developing sepsis from any infection at any time.

Sepsis always starts with an infection, which could be a bacterial, viral or fungal infection. It's not known why the immune response of some people develop sepsis in response to infections whereas others don't.

### Description: What Causes Sepsis

Sepsis always starts with an infection, this could be a bacterial, viral or fungal infection. It's not known why the immune response of some people develop sepsis in response to infections whereas others don't.

## Description: Signs and Symptoms of Sepsis

### Sepsis Signs for Adults

There is no single sign and no single diagnostic test for sepsis. Urgent medical help is needed for an adult developing any of these signs:

- Rapid breathing and/or heart rate
- Confusion, slurred speech and/or disorientation
- Fever and/or shivering
- Weakness and/or muscle pain
- Not passing urine
- New rash and/or discoloured skin
- Feeling like you're going to die

### Sepsis Signs for Children

There is no single sign and no single diagnostic test for sepsis. Urgent medical help is needed for a child developing any of these signs:

- Convulsions or fits
- Rapid breathing
- A rash that doesn't fade when you press it
- Fever or very low temperature
- Discoloured or mottled skin, very pale or bluish
- Not passing urine for several hours
- Hard to wake, lethargic or floppy
- Feels abnormally cold to touch
- The parent believes the child is extremely unwell

### Key messages about Signs and Symptoms

Not all symptoms need to be present and may be mild. People often say they feel like they are going to die, but remember, children may not be able to express this feeling, making it even harder to recognise.

If there is uncertainty about the cause of an illness and ongoing concern, then seek advice via Health Direct, or if getting worse, go to an Emergency Department as quickly as possible or call an ambulance.

Critical illness from sepsis is preventable if detected and treated quickly, like a heart attack or stroke - early intervention saves lives.

## Key Messages: Diagnosis and Treatment

Recognising sepsis can be challenging, as there is no single sign, symptom, or diagnostic test for it. Symptoms may present like typical flu or infections

It is when there are small changes in various signs and symptoms, combined with a person feeling or appearing extremely unwell—especially when the cause is unclear—that a person should seek urgent medical attention and a clinician should diagnose and treat with urgency.

For example:

- Small changes in multiple signs and symptoms such as temperature, drowsiness, rapid breathing, little to no urine output
- In some cases, it may be just one sign or symptom
- A person feeling or appearing extremely unwell – worse than normal
- When the cause of illness is unclear

Symptoms of sepsis can differ between adults and children, making early recognition crucial.

Clinicians must prioritise parental concerns as a vital component of assessment and treatment, recognising that parents have unique insight into their child's health. Their intuition and observations often serve as early indicators of deterioration, reinforcing the importance of listening to parental voices in the diagnostic process.

By acknowledging and acting on parental concerns, healthcare providers can improve early intervention, ultimately enhancing outcomes for children at risk of sepsis.

Suspecting sepsis in anyone who is severely ill and could potentially have an infection, even if not confirmed, can save lives. Those with sepsis require immediate and aggressive treatment, including escalation to a senior clinician. They are also likely candidates for hospital admission, often to an Intensive Care Unit.

In cases of suspected infection and unclear diagnosis, the early administration of antibiotics is crucial to controlling the infection—each hour of delay increases the risk of death or lifelong disability by 8-10%.

In addition to listening to the patient and patient's families, clinicians will screen for sepsis through a series of tests that determine infection, type of infection, organ function, level of inflammation in the body's blood.

## Main Message

**Sepsis can be hard to recognise, so trust your gut instinct . If you spot any of the signs or are concerned call 000 or go to Emergency and just ask: “**Could it be sepsis?**”**

## Key Messages: Preventing Sepsis

**Prevention reduces risk:** Certain infections that can lead to sepsis are preventable through vaccination, good hygiene, proper nutrition, and overall health maintenance.

**Early action is critical:** The progression of infection into sepsis can be prevented through early detection of symptoms, prompt medical care, and timely antimicrobial treatment.

**Keep seeking medical support:** If an individual has been treated by a GP or Emergency Department and sent home but does not feel like they are improving or has concerns about their condition, they should return immediately and not delay seeking further medical attention.

**Awareness and Timely Treatment:** Deaths and disabilities caused by sepsis can be reduced through increased awareness, understanding, timely treatment, and standardized recognition protocols and training.

## Sepsis, Septicaemia, and Blood Poisoning: Communicating the Differences

The term 'sepsis' is frequently misused interchangeably with the terms 'septicaemia', blood poisoning' and 'blood infection'. This can lead to miscommunication, life-threatening diagnostic errors and inappropriate treatment

**Sepsis** is the broader term that refers to body's immune response to ANY infection injuring its own tissues and organs. It can lead to organ failure, septic shock, and death if not treated promptly.

**Septicaemia** specifically refers to the presence of bacteria in the bloodstream, which may be termed as '**blood poisoning**'. Bacteria spread throughout the body through the bloodstream can cause serious infections in organs and tissues. **Septicaemia can lead to sepsis** if the infection triggers a systemic inflammatory response.

Consistent and correct use of the term 'sepsis' reinforces its identity as a severe, life-threatening condition that can arise from **ANY** infection. This practice helps to educate about the critical nature of sepsis and underscores the urgent need for immediate medical intervention to access life-saving treatment.

## Key Messages: Why There is Low Awareness of Sepsis

There are several challenges to increasing awareness of sepsis. These include:

**Complex Symptoms:** Sepsis symptoms can be quite vague and overlap with other common illnesses like flu or urinary tract infections. This makes it difficult for both the public and healthcare professionals to recognise it early.

**Lack of Public Education:** Unlike conditions such as heart disease or diabetes, sepsis doesn't receive as much attention in public health campaigns. Many people have never heard of sepsis, despite it being a leading cause of death.

**Misconceptions:** There are misconceptions about sepsis, such as confusing it with blood poisoning or septicaemia. This can lead to misunderstandings about its seriousness and the need for urgent treatment.

**Delayed Diagnosis:** Since sepsis progresses rapidly, there's often a narrow window for diagnosis and treatment. Delays in recognising and treating sepsis can lead to severe complications or death.

**Inconsistent Documentation:** Inconsistent documentation of sepsis which has caused extreme illness, death and morbidity can significantly impact awareness. This creates gaps in data, making it difficult to understand the true prevalence and impact of the and therefore hinder public health campaigns and education. It also impedes the urgency of treatment, research and the development of effective treatment protocols.

## Key Sepsis Statistics in Australia

- Sepsis kills 7 times as many Australians as road accidents
- Sepsis kills 2.5 times as many Australians as prostate or breast cancer
- Sepsis kills 8700 Australians each year
- The sepsis death rate is 1 in 3
- Only 28% of Australians are aware of sepsis symptoms
- Only 24% of Australians are aware of what causes sepsis
- 80% of sepsis cases begin outside of hospital
- The direct cost of sepsis to the Australian healthcare system is estimated to be approximately AUD 700 million per year, with an estimated cost to society of more than \$4.6 billion.

## Sepsis Australia Contact Details

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