

Life After Sepsis

What you need to know

After recovering from a serious infection (sepsis), patients are at a higher risk of needing to come back to the hospital. This handout has advice on what to expect during recovery, how to take care of yourself, what the long-term effects can be, and when to call your nurse or provider.

What is sepsis?

Sepsis is a very serious health problem that can happen when your body has too strong of a reaction to an infection. Sepsis can make you so sick that the body harms itself while trying to protect you. It can damage important organs like the heart, brain, and lungs, so it must be treated right away.

What causes sepsis?

Any major infection can cause sepsis. Infections happen when germs get into the body and multiply. These germs may be a virus, bacteria, or fungus. Sepsis can be caused by an infection anywhere in your body, but it is usually caused by infections in your lungs, skin, digestive system, or urinary system.



Ask your nurse or provider if you have any questions about your recovery plan.

What can I expect while healing from sepsis

Recovering from sepsis can take a long time, and the healing process begins while you are still in the hospital. Your body is recovering not only from the infection itself, but also from the effects sepsis may have had on your organs and tissues. This recovery is often more challenging and takes longer than recovering from a typical infection.

Everyone is different, but many patients healing from sepsis need extra help taking care of themselves. You may need help with daily activities like sitting, standing, bathing, and using the restroom while you are in the hospital. Some patients still need help with daily activities after going home.

Are there any long-term effects of sepsis?

Many people recover fully after sepsis, and their lives return to normal. For other patients, there are long-term effects. Up to 50% of patients can have “Post-Sepsis Syndrome” (PSS) which may include the following symptoms.



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Sepsis can affect your rest and comfort:

- Extreme fatigue (tiredness)
- Insomnia (problems falling asleep or staying asleep)
- Nightmares or daydreams that seem real
- Muscle and joint pains

Sepsis can affect your brain:

- Forgetfulness
- Problems concentrating

Sepsis can affect your mental health:

- Flashbacks or bad memories
- Panic attacks or PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)
- Feeling more worried or anxious
- Frustration at the changes in your life
- Depression and lack of motivation
- Loss of self-esteem

How can I help myself recover at home?

Physical Recovery

- Make sure you can get and take all your usual medications. Review your medications with your care team when you go home.
- Set weekly goals for yourself that you can easily meet. These may include taking a bath, dressing yourself, or walking up stairs.
- Exercise if you feel up to it. Start slowly and rest as needed.
- Rest and rebuild your strength.
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet.

Emotional Recovery

- Talk about your feelings with family and friends.
- Write your thoughts, struggles, and milestones in a journal.
- Learn about sepsis to understand what happened.
- If you have gaps in your memory, ask your family to tell you what happened while you were sick.
- Make a list of questions to ask your provider when you go for a checkup 1-2 weeks after discharge.

When should I seek medical help?

After sepsis, you are at higher risk of getting another infection, heart problems, blood clots, or stroke, especially in the months after discharge. Conditions you already had, such as heart disease, kidney disease, or diabetes, may temporarily get worse after sepsis.

Go to the emergency department or call 911 if you have:

- Chest pain or chest pressure
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fast or racing heart rate
- Sudden, severe headache
- Weakness on one side of the body
- Facial droop on one side of the face
- Slurred speech / having trouble talking
- Pain, warmth, and swelling in your legs

Get medical help right away if you have:

- Signs of infection or fever (new cough, new wound, new difficulty or pain while peeing, or new fever after your previous infection has gone away)
- Increased redness, swelling, or a bad smell at a site of infection you already know about
- Confusion or unusual sleepiness

Call your nurse or provider if:

- You are not getting better
- You feel overwhelmed or unable to cope
- You have any questions or concerns

Where can I learn more?

To learn more about sepsis, visit these websites or use the QR codes on the right:

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):**

- cdc.gov/sepsis/prevention/index.html
- cdc.gov/sepsis/living-with/index.html

- **Sepsis Alliance:** sepsis.org

This organization offers information on a variety of topics related to sepsis. Visit sepsis.org/education/resources for a full list of titles.



CDC: Sepsis Prevention



CDC: Living with Sepsis



Sepsis Alliance



Sepsis Alliance: Resources

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

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