



Life after sepsis

What survivors and their families need to know

Sepsis is a life-threatening medical emergency that arises when the body responds to an infection which damages its own organs and tissues.

What is post-sepsis syndrome?

Post-sepsis syndrome (PSS) is a condition that affects up to 50 percent of sepsis survivors. It is a condition that has a wide range of physical, emotional and psychological effects. Many people who have survived sepsis will make a full recovery, but it's important to know that recovery and returning to your usual daily activities can take months or even years.

Who is at risk of developing post-sepsis syndrome?

Any sepsis survivor, regardless of their age, can develop post-sepsis syndrome. While the risk of having PSS is higher among people admitted to the Intensive Care Unit and for those who have had a long hospital admission, any survivor can suffer a range of illnesses defined by PSS. People over 65 years of age who have survived sepsis may be at greater risk of suffering from long-term cognitive and physical impairment.

What causes post-sepsis syndrome?

The cause of PSS is not fully understood. For some survivors, the impact on the body is obvious, such as amputations or organ dysfunction. For others, the effects are less visible but create significant challenges in their recovery. The damage caused by sepsis to vital organs can take a long time to heal, which may contribute to the development of PSS. Genetics and chronic health conditions are also thought to contribute to the development or severity of PSS.

Sepsis does not end at hospital discharge

Presentations of PSS can vary greatly from person to person. Some may experience just one or two symptoms, but others may experience more.

Some of the signs and symptoms may include:

Physical symptoms

- Difficulty swallowing
- Muscle weakness
- Weight loss
- Lack of appetite, food tasting different
- Brittle nails and hair loss
- Body aches or pains
- Headaches
- Visual and speech disorders
- Chronic nerve pain such as tingling and intensified pain in extremities
- Joint and muscle pain, including paralysis

Emotional and psychological symptoms

- Post-traumatic stress symptoms
- Nightmares
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Sadness
- Mood swings
- Clouded thinking
- Difficulty concentrating
- Fatigue and tiredness
- Poor memory
- Reduced attention span
- Difficulty sleeping
- Panic attacks
- Hallucinations



Sepsis survivors are at higher risk of getting sepsis again.

How can I stop sepsis happening again?

Sepsis survivors have an increased risk of sepsis recurrence. The reason for this is not fully understood but is thought to be due to resulting immune system damage.

Sepsis is caused by infections, so preventing them will reduce your risk of sepsis.

Here are some tips to prevent infection:

- Practise good hygiene - keep your body and hands clean.
- Avoid being around anyone who is sick.
- Monitor wounds, inspect bites and cuts closely; if they are not healing or become red or hot, book an appointment with your GP.
- If you develop an infection, make sure you see your GP and take antibiotics as prescribed.
- If you go to hospital or visit a doctor, make sure you inform them of your past diagnosis of sepsis.
- Stay up-to-date with your vaccinations, including your annual flu shot.
- Look after your chronic diseases.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle by eating a healthy, balanced diet and getting enough physical exercise to rebuild your strength.
- Know the signs and symptoms of sepsis, act fast and seek medical care immediately.



For families, carers and loved ones

How can you help?

Be patient: Recovery takes time, and sepsis survivors may experience setbacks or slow improvement. Patience and understanding go a long way in supporting them through the process.

Provide emotional support: Sepsis survivors often struggle with anxiety, depression, or feelings of frustration. Offer a listening ear, provide encouragement, and remind them that it's okay to take things one day at a time.

Assist with daily activities: Simple tasks that may have once been easy, such as walking, cooking, or even dressing, can feel overwhelming after sepsis. Helping with these activities can alleviate stress and promote a smoother recovery.

Encourage physical and cognitive rehabilitation: Many sepsis survivors benefit from physical therapy, occupational therapy or cognitive exercises to regain strength and focus. Encouraging consistent participation in these programs can aid their recovery.

Stay informed and involved: Understanding post-sepsis syndrome and how it affects the person can help you recognise when they may need more help or when to celebrate small victories. Attending medical appointments with them or learning about sepsis recovery together can deepen your understanding and strengthen your support.

Further information

<https://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/standards/clinical-care-standards/sepsis-clinical-care-standard/information-consumers>

Post Sepsis Syndrome

Sepsis Australia (australiansepsisnetwork.net.au)

Amputation

Your-amputation-journey.pdf (health.wa.gov.au)



Scan the QR code for more information

Ask for help

Being discharged from hospital after surviving sepsis can be a big adjustment. Your recovery from sepsis may be challenging, overwhelming and stressful. Don't be afraid to ask for help.

The information provided is for information purposes only. If you are a patient using this publication, you should seek assistance from a healthcare professional when interpreting these materials and applying them to your individual circumstances.



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