



National  
Guidance

[oeapng.info](http://oeapng.info)

## Sepsis

Sepsis is a life-threatening condition arising when the body's immune system reacts to an infection. Worldwide, it results in more deaths than cancer. In the UK, it affects hundreds of young people every year. Sepsis is a medical emergency – delays of just a few hours in accessing health care can make the difference between life and death. Visit leaders therefore need to be aware of the possibility of participants developing sepsis, and to know what to do.

Sepsis can be triggered by any infection, including pneumonia, urinary infection, skin and soft tissue infection, abdominal infections such as appendicitis, and meningitis. This means that, whilst minor self-limiting infections are very common and require little or no action, a young person with symptoms of an infection (such as a fever, a cough or feeling generally run down) should be considered potentially at risk of sepsis.

Sepsis typically develops over 48-72 hours, but it can be much more rapid. Young adults can be incredibly resilient – they can function normally as an illness develops and then experience a sudden and rapid deterioration. In rare cases a young person can progress from looking and feeling relatively well to being critically ill in just a few hours. Delay in seeking medical help can be fatal.

## Symptoms of Sepsis

Sepsis is difficult to spot, even for an experienced health care professional, so the key for a leader is to trust your instincts and to act if you are concerned. Don't worry about overreacting – health professionals would rather see a healthy young person than have a case of sepsis missed.

If someone develops any one of the following symptoms, it is vital to get them to hospital as quickly as possible (in the UK, take them to A&E or dial 999).

- **Slurred speech or confusion;**
- **Extreme pain in the muscles or joints;**
- **Passing no urine in a day;**
- **Severe breathlessness;**
- **'It feels like I'm going to die';**
- **Skin that's mottled, discoloured or very pale.**

If you think they are very sick, but the hospital isn't taking their condition seriously, you may need to trust your instincts and be assertive. **Just ask: "Could it be sepsis?"**

## Other Indicators of Sepsis

The following can also be indicators of sepsis:

- Not recovering from an infection (e.g., from a fever, a cough or feeling generally run down) as fast or as fully as you would expect;
- Deteriorating or generally going a bit downhill;
- Abnormal behaviour:
  - Ask "is this person's behaviour normal for them?" – In many cases, family and friends have commented, "They just weren't themselves.";
  - Consult others who know the person better than you do – perhaps ask their friends or contact their parents whether they are normally like this when they are unwell;
- Severe lethargy – ask others who might know them if they normally take themselves to bed when unwell;
- A 'fit' or convulsion;
- A rash that does not fade when you press it;
- Laboured or fast and shallow breathing;
- Fast and weak pulse (compare it with your own or someone else who is well);
- Unusually cold skin, such as on the hands or feet.

If you are worried, for example if a young person is behaving abnormally, feels a little cold to the touch or is very lethargic, then seek medical advice without delay: in the UK, you can use NHS 111. You might find it helpful to just ask the health professional, "**Could it be sepsis?**".

## Prevention of Sepsis

By cleaning and caring for any wounds and ensuring that everyone washes their hands regularly, you can help to prevent sepsis by reducing the likelihood of infections.

## Further Information

Further information about sepsis is available at the following websites:

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/sepsis](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/sepsis)  
[sepsistrust.org](http://sepsistrust.org)

The Sepsis Trust has produced a short video with information on what to look for in young adults who may have sepsis: [sepsistrust.org/young-adults-video](http://sepsistrust.org/young-adults-video)

