Sepsis: More Common and Deadly Than You May Think

AMDA President Karl Steinberg, MD, CMD, HMDC, talks about a serious condition you may not be familiar with but should be to keep your loved one safe.

A potentially life-threatening condition that happens when the body’s response to an infection damages its own tissues, sepsis is more common than you may think. It is important to understand sepsis and be able to recognize it early. This can save a life and prevent suffering.

Sepsis, which can progress to septic shock, kills and disables millions of people annually. This condition happens when an infection somewhere in the body enters the bloodstream. When this occurs, bacteria and toxins can be carried through the entire body.

Although any type of infection can lead to sepsis, the most common contributors include infections of the lungs (such as pneumonia), kidney, digestive system, bloodstream, catheter sites, and wounds or burns. COVID-19 also puts people at risk of sepsis.

Older adults are at greater risk for sepsis. Other risk factors include a compromised immune system, diabetes, chronic kidney or liver disease, malnutrition, admission to an intensive care unit or longer hospital stays, invasive devices such as intravenous catheters or breathing tubes, and previous use of antibiotics or corticosteroids and other immune suppressants.

Although sepsis can be deadly and exacerbate quickly, it can potentially be managed if caught early. It’s important to watch for symptoms in your loved one and report any of these to a practitioner right away. These symptoms include:

- Abnormal body temperature: above 101.3 degrees or below 95 degrees.
- Heart rate higher than 90 beats per minute.
- Shaking/chills.
- New or worsening confusion (this may be more common in older patients).

Sepsis is dangerous for everyone, but it can be especially damaging for older adults. Severe sepsis survivors in this population are much more likely to see a drop in cognitive (mental) abilities, which can make it difficult or dangerous for them to live on their own. If they already live in a nursing home or an assisted living community, sepsis can increase their need for help with activities of daily living and for other support. At any age, sepsis survivors sometimes have life-changing conditions such as chronic pain and fatigue, organ dysfunction, and/or amputations.

To increase the chance of survival, sepsis needs to be recognized and treated as quickly as possible. Treatment commonly involves the use of intravenous fluids and antibiotics. Other medications also may be needed to treat low blood pressure or other issues. In extreme cases, the patient may need to be put on a ventilator to help with breathing.

The best way to prevent sepsis is to stop infections from developing in the first place. In light of everything we’ve been through with the pandemic, you may already be doing many things to help prevent infections. These include getting vaccinated for COVID-19, influenza, pneumococcal pneumonia, and other illnesses; practicing good handwashing; and avoiding social situations where infections can easily spread. Other measures to prevent sepsis include caring properly for all wounds, even small ones, and seeking help immediately for any and all infections.

If your loved one shows any signs that could indicate sepsis, report it immediately to his/her physician or other practitioner. Now that facilities are starting to open up, you can help prevent infections by getting the COVID-19 vaccination, washing your hands frequently, and keeping up with other efforts to fend off infections. You also can help keep your loved one healthy by making sure he/she is eating well, staying alert and active (as much as possible and appropriate), and getting enough sleep.

Questions to Ask Your Practitioners

- Is my loved one at risk for sepsis? How can I help prevent it?
- Is it safe for me to visit my loved one? Can I touch and hug him/her? Is it okay for me to bring food and beverages?
- How important is it to recognize and report signs of sepsis quickly?

What You Can Do

- Report any symptoms that may indicate sepsis immediately.
- Practice appropriate infection prevention and control measures.
- Don’t visit your loved one if you are sick or feel like you’re getting ill.
- Encourage your loved one to get enough to eat and drink so that he/she doesn’t get dehydrated or malnourished.

For More Information