

# LIFE AFTER SEPSIS FACT SHEET

## WHAT SEPSIS SURVIVORS NEED TO KNOW

### ABOUT SEPSIS

#### What is sepsis?

Sepsis is the body's overwhelming and life-threatening response to an infection which can lead to tissue damage, organ failure, and death.

#### What causes sepsis?

Any type of infection that is anywhere in your body can cause sepsis, including infections of the skin, lungs (such as pneumonia), urinary tract, abdomen (such as appendicitis), or other part of the body. An infection occurs when germs enter a person's body and multiply, causing illness and organ and tissue damage.

#### What are the different types of sepsis?

Many doctors view sepsis as a three-stage syndrome:

- **SEPSIS** causes fever, rapid heart rate/breathing, and an increased white blood cell count. If you have an infection, even a minor sign or symptom can indicate sepsis, and you should seek medical treatment immediately.
- **SEVERE SEPSIS** is when there are also signs and symptoms which indicate an organ may be failing. Immediate hospital treatment is required.
- **SEPTIC SHOCK** is when you have severe sepsis, plus extremely low blood pressure that doesn't respond to fluid replacement. Immediate hospital treatment is required.

### LIFE AFTER SEPSIS

#### What are the first steps in recovery?

After you have had sepsis, rehabilitation usually starts in the hospital by slowly helping you to move around and look after yourself: bathing, sitting up, standing, walking, taking yourself to the restroom, etc. The purpose of rehabilitation is to restore you back to your previous level of health or as close to it as possible. Begin your rehabilitation by building up your activities slowly, and rest when you are tired.

#### How will I feel when I get home?

You have been seriously ill, and your body and mind need time to get better. You may experience the following physical symptoms upon returning home:

- General to extreme weakness and fatigue
- Breathlessness
- General body pains or aches
- Difficulty moving around
- Difficulty sleeping
- Weight loss, lack of appetite, food not tasting normal
- Dry and itchy skin that may peel
- Brittle nails
- Hair loss



*There are more than*  
**1.4 MILLION**  
*sepsis survivors every year*  
*in the United States.*

*Many survivors are*  
left with **LIFE-**  
**CHANGING**  
*challenges.*



Centers for Disease  
Control and Prevention  
National Center for Emerging and  
Zoonotic Infectious Diseases

It is also not unusual to have the following feelings once you're at home:

- Unsure of yourself
- Not caring about your appearance
- Wanting to be alone, avoiding friends and family
- Flashbacks, bad memories
- Confusing reality (e.g., not sure what is real and what isn't)
- Feeling anxious, more worried than usual
- Poor concentration
- Depressed, angry, unmotivated
- Frustration at not being able to do everyday tasks

### What can I do to help myself recover at home?

- Set small, achievable goals for yourself each week, such as taking a bath, dressing yourself, or walking up the stairs
- Rest and rebuild your strength
- Talk about what you are feeling to family and friends
- Record your thoughts, struggles, and milestones in a journal
- Learn about sepsis to understand what happened
- Ask your family to fill in any gaps you may have in your memory about what happened to you
- Eat a balanced diet
- Exercise if you feel up to it
- Make a list of questions to ask your doctor when you go for a check up

### Are there any long-term effects of sepsis?

Many people who survive sepsis recover completely and their lives return to normal. However, older people, people who have suffered more severe sepsis and those treated in an intensive care unit are at greatest risk of long-term problems, including suffering from post-sepsis syndrome.

### What is post-sepsis syndrome?

Post-sepsis syndrome is the term used to describe the group of long-term problems that some people with severe sepsis experience. These problems may not become apparent for several weeks (post-sepsis), and may include such long-term consequences as

- Insomnia, difficulty getting to or staying asleep
- Nightmares, vivid hallucinations, panic attacks
- Disabling muscle and joint pains
- Decreased mental (cognitive) functioning
- Loss of self-esteem and self-belief
- Organ dysfunction (kidney failure, respiratory problems, etc.)
- Amputations (loss of limb(s))

### What's normal and when should I be concerned?

Generally, the problems described in this fact sheet do improve with time. They are a normal response to what you have been through.

Some hospitals have follow-up clinics or staff to help patients and families once they have been discharged. Find out if yours does or if there are local resources available to help you while you get better.

However, if you feel that you are not getting better, or finding it difficult to cope, or continue to be exhausted call your doctor.

### Where can I get more information?

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)—CDC works 24/7 protecting America's health, safety and security. Whether diseases start at home or abroad, are curable or preventable, chronic or acute, stem from human error or deliberate attack, CDC is committed to responding to America's most pressing health challenges. [cdc.gov/sepsis](https://www.cdc.gov/sepsis)  
[cdc.gov/cancer/preventinfections](https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/preventinfections)
- Rory Staunton Foundation—The Rory Staunton Foundation supports education and outreach efforts aimed at rapid diagnosis and treatment of sepsis, particularly in children. [rorystaunton.com](https://www.rorystaunton.com)
- Sepsis Alliance®—Created to raise sepsis awareness among both the general public and healthcare professionals. Sepsis Alliance offers information on a variety of sepsis-related topics. Visit [sepsis.org/library](https://www.sepsis.org/library) to view the complete series of titles. [sepsis.org](https://www.sepsis.org)