

body&soul

Sepsis is the illness of which I am most terrified. So learn the 'sepsis six' symptoms to look out for

Dr Mark Porter

What are you most scared of? Cancer? Dementia? Motor neurone disease? A heart attack? All feature high on most people's lists of nasty diseases, but it is sepsis (blood poisoning) that tops mine. It may have a comparatively low profile, but sepsis is common. At least ten people across the UK are likely to die from it today, with many more surviving it, but left maimed or disabled.

The human stories behind the cold statistics explain why I dread sepsis so much. At least three cases have made the headlines over the past fortnight alone: a man who lost his legs and part of his face after being scratched by a dog; a young mother who died from a skin infection around her ankle; and a grandmother who is likely to lose her hands and legs after developing sepsis from a tiny cut on her finger.

"Time is of the essence" is an oft-used cliché in medicine, but in sepsis it really can mean the difference between life and death. Caught early, the outcome is likely to be good. Caught late and it is bleak. And this is where you come in, by making sure

Sepsis: the numbers

There is some uncertainty about just how common sepsis is. Official figures suggest that there are about 160,000 cases every year in the UK, leading to about 40,000 deaths. However, a recent independent study commissioned by the UK Sepsis Trust suggests that the total figure could be closer to 250,000 cases, with deaths and long-term complications (often exacerbated by delayed diagnosis) costing the UK economy nearly £16 billion a year.



that you know the warning signs of sepsis and, just as importantly, by encouraging those looking after you to check for it.

Sepsis is caused by a combination of infection and the body's immune response to attack, which, rather than helping to eliminate the invader, can sometimes trigger a cascade reaction leading to shock, multiple organ failure and death. Sepsis typically develops after serious bacterial infections such as pneumonia or meningitis, but it can complicate seemingly mundane ones too. The trick is not to focus solely on the triggering condition, but to consider the individual as a whole. They might just have a cut on their leg, or "cystitis", but if they are showing signs of serious infection then they should be treated with the same urgency as a barn-door case of meningitis. So what should you look for?

In adults, think SEPSIS: Slurred speech or confusion. Extreme shivering or muscle aches. Passing no urine in a day. Severe breathlessness. "I feel like I might die." Skin mottled or discoloured or a reddish-purplish rash that doesn't blanch with pressure (use the side of a glass). If any of these apply, seek

medical help urgently and make sure you ask: "Could it be sepsis?"

In children, check for fast breathing. Normal ranges vary with age and there is no need to count; as a parent you will know immediately if your child's respiratory rate is higher than normal simply by looking.

Have they had a convulsion/seizure? Does their skin look mottled, pale or blueish? Do they, or their extremities, feel abnormally cold to touch? Do they have a non-blanching rash? Are they very lethargic or difficult to wake? If so, dial 999 and ask: "Could it be sepsis?"

In younger children (under five) other early warning signs may include refusing to feed, repeated vomiting and not passing urine (a wet nappy) for 12 hours. And even if these three are present in isolation, without any of the signs above, call 111 or your GP and ask: "Could it be sepsis?"

Most suspected cases turn out to be much less serious, but the combination of vigilance on your part and the mention of sepsis to the paramedic/nurse/doctor can only facilitate earlier diagnosis. Cases will still slip through the net, but the UK Sepsis Trust believes that earlier intervention with therapies such as antibiotics, intravenous fluids and oxygen could save about 10,000 lives a year in the UK and dramatically improve the outlook for the many thousands who survive.

We have made huge progress during the three decades that I have been a doctor. When I qualified about three quarters of patients with sepsis died. Today that statistic has been turned on its head and three quarters are expected to survive, but there is still room for improvement.

For more information visit sepsistrust.org