

SEPSIS AND CANCER

Cancer is a term that describes several malignant (dangerous, harmful) diseases that can affect just about every organ and system in your body. Malignant cells, or cancer cells, are abnormal cells that continue to multiply in an uncontrolled fashion. Unlike normal cells, which can stop multiplying and die off as they should, cancer cells continue to multiply and can form tumors and growths. These can invade or spread to other areas of the body.

Having cancer and undergoing certain treatments for cancer, such as chemotherapy, can result in a weakened immune system, putting you at higher risk for developing an infection that could lead to sepsis.

Sepsis and septic shock can result from an infection anywhere, such as pneumonia, influenza, or urinary tract infections. Worldwide, one-third of people who develop sepsis die. Many who do survive are left with life-changing effects, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), chronic pain and fatigue, organ dysfunction (organs don't work properly) and/or amputations.

WHY DOES CANCER INCREASE RISK?

There are several reasons why people with cancer may be at higher risk of developing sepsis than people who don't have cancer. These include:

- Frequent hospital stays, increasing the risk of contracting a hospital-acquired infection
- Surgeries, procedures that puncture the skin, insertion of urinary catheters, etc.
- Depressed immune system because of treatment to fight the cancer
- Weakness due to malnutrition, illness or frailty from age

CHEMOTHERAPY

Chemotherapy, a common cancer treatment, works by killing the fastest growing cells in your body, both good and bad. This means along with killing cancer cells, chemotherapy also kills white blood cells that fight infections, causing neutropenia. While you are receiving treatment, your oncologist will routinely check your blood to see what your white blood cell count is. The lower your blood count, the higher the risk of contracting an infection.

PREVENTION

Infection prevention practices are always a good idea, but they are even more important if you are undergoing cancer treatment. Following these suggestions may help decrease your risk of contracting an infection, which can lead to sepsis:

- Wash your hands often and ask others around you to do the same
- Avoid crowded places and people who are sick
- Talk to your doctor about which vaccinations you should get and encourage those around you to be vaccinated against illnesses like the flu
- Bathe or shower everyday unless told otherwise by your healthcare team
- Use unscented lotions; keep your skin from getting dry and cracked
- Clean your teeth and gums with a soft toothbrush
- Follow your doctor's instructions about using a mouthwash if you have mouth sores
- Do not share food, drinks, cups, utensils, toothbrushes, razors, or any other personal items

KNOW THE SIGNS OF INFECTION

The signs and symptoms of an infection will vary according to what type of infection you have and what part of the body it affects, but here are the most common signs and symptoms.

- Fever, chills, or sweats
- Redness, soreness in a specific area, particularly surgical wounds or ports
- Diarrhea and/or vomiting
- Sore throat, cough, nasal congestion
- New sores in your mouth
- Shortness of breath
- Stiff neck
- Unusual vaginal discharge or irritation
- Changes in skin, urination, or mental status

IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE AN INFECTION

Call your doctor or go to the emergency room immediately. This is a medical emergency. Tell your medical team, "I have cancer and I am concerned about infection and sepsis."

WHAT IS SEPSIS?

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

What are the signs and symptoms of sepsis?

Sepsis is a toxic response to an infection. There is no single sign or symptom of sepsis. It is, rather, a combination of symptoms.

Symptoms can include ANY of the following:

T	Temperature: Higher or lower than normal
I	Infection: May have signs and symptoms of an infection
M	Mental Decline: Confused, sleepy, difficult to rouse
E	Extremely Ill: Severe pain, discomfort, shortness of breath

SEPSIS IS A MEDICAL EMERGENCY. IF YOU SUSPECT SEPSIS, CALL 9-1-1 OR GO TO A HOSPITAL RIGHT AWAY.

To learn more about sepsis, or to read tributes and survivor stories, visit us online at [Sepsis.org](https://sepsis.org)



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