

SEPSIS & PREGNANCY & CHILDBIRTH

Although pregnancy is the same for people worldwide, their safety varies greatly depending on where they live and the type of medical care they receive, if any. Sepsis is a condition that can develop during pregnancy and after delivery, as well as after a miscarriage or abortion. This is called maternal sepsis.

Sometimes incorrectly called blood poisoning, sepsis is the body's life-threatening response to infection. It affects 1.7 million people in the United States each year.

Maternal sepsis used to also be known by other terms, such as postpartum or puerperal sepsis. Experts were concerned that this may be confusing, so the World Health Organization (WHO) suggests the term "maternal sepsis" be used for all sepsis cases during pregnancy and during the postpartum period.

Maternal sepsis is more common in developing countries, but it also strikes people in wealthier countries, including in the United States. According to the CDC, sepsis is the second leading cause of pregnancy-related deaths. Between 2014 and 2017, infection or sepsis caused 12.7% of pregnancy-related deaths in the United States.

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 SEPSIS OCCURS

Sepsis can occur because of an infection related to the pregnancy and delivery, or an unrelated one, such as pneumonia or a urinary tract infection (UTI). The most common infections that trigger maternal sepsis are caused by bacteria such as E. coli.

Sepsis can develop as the result of many complications. Here are a few:

- **Miscarriages (spontaneous abortions) or induced abortions:** Infections are a risk after any miscarriage or abortion. Non-sterile abortions (those that may be done outside of a healthcare facility) pose a particular risk.
- **Cesarean sections:** Sepsis can develop after any type of surgery. C-sections are major abdominal surgeries with all the associated risks.
- **Prolonged or obstructed labor:** An unusually long time of labor or labor that stops progressing.
- **Ruptured membranes:** The longer the period between the "water breaking" and the baby's birth, the higher the chance of an infection.
- **Infection following vaginal delivery:** Although not common in the developed world among those who give birth in healthcare facilities, infections are very common in the developing world.
- **Mastitis:** Infection in the breasts can trigger sepsis.

RISK GROUPS

Anyone who is pregnant, has miscarried or aborted, or who has delivered a child is at risk of developing maternal sepsis. However, some people do have a higher risk than others. This includes those who are Black, have never been pregnant before, and/or have public or no health insurance.

People who may be more prone to getting an infection are those:

- With diabetes
- Who undergo invasive procedures to help them get pregnant
- Who undergo invasive tests during pregnancy

CHALLENGES IN DETECTING SEPSIS

Diagnosing sepsis during pregnancy or after a recent delivery can be challenging. Pregnancy and delivery causes many changes in the body, including a faster heart beat, changes in blood pressure, and faster breathing. Also, many people get chills and sweat heavily after giving birth. They may have pain, or feel dizzy or lightheaded. Usually these are signs that may alert a healthcare provider that there might be something wrong, such as an infection.

It also may be more difficult to diagnose infections during pregnancy and during the postpartum period. For example, urinary tract infections usually cause a frequent need to urinate, but pregnancy alone causes frequent urination.

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://www.sepsis.org)



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