

Septicaemia

What is septicaemia?

Septicaemia is a blood infection caused by bacteria. [1] It is sometimes known as blood poisoning. [2] A healthy immune system works by targeting specific threats. [1] When the immune system is under attack the area that is affected will become inflamed to fight the infection. [1] When disease-causing bacteria are in a person's blood, as in the case of septicaemia, the immune system may respond by attacking its own tissues and organs. [3] This is known as sepsis. [1]

Septicaemia is a medical emergency. [1] If not treated quickly it can lead to organ failure and even death. [1]

Who is at risk of septicaemia?

Septicaemia is more common in hospitalised patients, although it also occurs in other people. [1] The very young and elderly, people with chronic illnesses, people who have weaker immune systems and people who have suffered recent trauma (including serious surgery) are more at risk of septicaemia. [1]

Septicaemia can also develop from causes such as a catheter or abscess (a swollen, pussy area) [1], listeria infection [4] or meningococcal disease. [5]

Symptoms of septicaemia

The symptoms of septicaemia can vary and can sometimes look like another illness. [1] Septicaemia symptoms can be especially unusual in the elderly or very young. [1]

Symptoms may include: [1]

- sudden fever
- chills
- fast breathing
- rapid heart rate
- tiredness
- headaches

Later symptoms include: [1]

- confusion
- anxiety
- low urine output
- pain in the stomach or pelvis
- nausea and vomiting
- coughing
- difficulty breathing
- mottled skin
- a sudden drop in blood pressure - this is a sign that the person has progressed to septic shock

Diagnosis of septicaemia

Several tests are available to diagnose septicaemia and understand its effect on the body. [1] These include: [1]

- blood tests – to detect inflammation, distinguish between bacterial infection and other causes of infection, count red and white blood cells and platelets, detect levels of electrolytes, lactic acid and oxygen in your blood and check how well your liver is functioning
- urine tests – to find the source and type of infection
- cerebrospinal fluid. This is only tested occasionally, to determine if a person has meningitis

Other tests used to find the site of infection, detect complications and evaluate the health of the organs include: [1]

- ECG (electrocardiogram)
- x-ray
- CT (computed tomography) scanning
- MRI (magnetic resonance imaging)
- ultrasound

Complications of septicaemia

Septicaemia can lead to serious infections in the organs. Complications can include:

- meningitis, an infection in the outside layers of the brain [2]
- peritonitis, an infection in the lining of the abdomen [2]
- endocarditis, an infection in the inner layer of the heart [2]

- septic arthritis, an infection in the joints [2]
- septic shock, a sudden drop in blood pressure which can lead to organ failure [1]

Treatment of septicaemia

Immediate treatment is important as septicaemia can lead to death. [1] Strong, intravenous (injected) antibiotics and fluids are used to treat septicaemia. [3] Once tests have determined which type of bacteria is causing the illness, the most effective antibiotic can be used to fight the infection. [1]

References

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