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Definition of Sepsis

sep•sis (ˈ sep-səs) *n.* Sometimes called **blood poisoning**, sepsis is the body's often deadly response to infection or injury.

Medical professionals have been debating the exact definition of sepsis for decades. However, one thing they can agree upon is the origin of the disease. The word *sepsis* comes from the Greek meaning “decay” or “to putrefy.” In medical terms, sepsis is defined as either “the presence of pathogenic organisms or their toxins in the blood and tissues” or “the poisoned condition resulting from the presence of pathogens or their toxins as in septicemia.”

Patients are given a diagnosis of sepsis when they develop clinical signs of infections or systemic inflammation; sepsis is not diagnosed based on the location of the infection or by the name of the causative **microbe**. Physicians draw from a list of signs and symptoms in order to make a diagnosis of sepsis, including abnormalities of body temperature, heart rate, respiratory rate, and white blood cell count. Sepsis may be diagnosed in a 72-year-old man with **pneumonia**, fever, and a high white blood count, and in a 3-month-old with **appendicitis**, low body temperature, and a low white count.

Sepsis is defined as severe when these findings occur in association with signs of **organ dysfunction**, such as **hypoxemia**, **oliguria**, **lactic acidosis**, elevated liver enzymes, and altered **cerebral function**. Nearly all victims of severe sepsis require treatment in an intensive care unit for several days or weeks. While most cases of sepsis are associated with disease or injury, many events follow routine, even elective surgery.

More frightening is that sepsis can rage in response to incidents as seemingly **benign** as a playground scrape or a nicked cuticle from the beauty parlor. American hospitals spend approximately \$20 billion each year combating sepsis, 40% of patients diagnosed with severe sepsis do not survive. Until a cure for sepsis is found, early detection is the surest hope for survival.

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