FOCUS ON...

Sepsis The silent killer?

Sepsis can be devastating if left untreated. Dr Jeff Foster gives the lowdown on this life-threatening condition

You won't have gone far in the past year without reading headlines such as 'An infection took my legs, hands and nose', or 'Surrey mum's warning to parents over silent killer'. Diagnosis of sepsis is on the rise, with over 260,000 people affected each year in the UK, including 44,000 deaths. So what actually is sepsis and how can you protect yourself?

Sepsis 101

Sepsis is a life-threatening condition where your body reacts in an extreme way to an infection. The infection may have started in a particular part of the body – chest, urinary tract, a burst ulcer in your stomach, or even a cut or bite on your skin. Normally, your immune system will produce white blood cells to destroy the germs and the tissue around the area will swell, keeping the infection in place (also known as inflammation).

'But with sepsis, your body releases chemicals into your blood stream, causing acute inflammatory reactions everywhere,' explains Dr Jeff Foster, GP at Spire Parkway Hospital and TFJ Private GP services (tfjprivategp.co.uk). This widespread inflammation damages tissues and interferes with your blood flow, making your blood pressure drop and stopping oxygen reaching your organs. 'This can then lead to multiple organ failure and death,' he adds.

Are case numbers rising?

'Numbers of patients being diagnosed with sepsis are increasing,' says Dr Foster. But why?

1 We're looking out for it more. Even five to 10 years ago there were still missed cases of sepsis and, as a result, people were dying without being diagnosed. GPs and hospital doctors are now better trained to spot signs.

2 People are living longer, thanks to advancements in treatments for heart attacks, strokes and cancer. But patients with complex medical problems are more likely to develop sepsis.

3 Among children, 50% of those who develop sepsis will develop it again. So as the condition is successfully treated, numbers will go up.

Spot the signs

'It's important to remember that the overwhelming majority of adults and children with any infection will not go on to develop sepsis,' says Dr Foster. 'But if it doesn't fit a normal infection pattern, get advice from a health professional as soon as possible,' he adds. The government and the UK Sepsis Trust have released several guidelines on what to look for, including this clever acronym below.

Slurred speech or confusion
Extreme shivering or muscle pain
Passing no urine (in a day)
Severe breathlessness
It feels like you're going to die
Skin mottled or discoloured

Protecting your family

Sepsis symptoms in children can be much more subtle. 'Look for a very high or low temperature,' says Dr Foster and ask yourself the following questions:

- Are they breathing very fast?
- Have they had a 'fit' or convulsion'?
- Does their skin look mottled, bluish, or pale?
- Do they have a rash that does not fade when you press it?
- Are they lethargic or difficult to wake?
- Do they feel abnormally cold to touch?

£2 billion is the estimated amount (including long-term complications) that sepsis costs the NHS annually.

Who is at risk?

'Anyone can get sepsis, but certain groups are more susceptible,' explains Dr Foster.

- Babies under one and adults over 75.
- Those with weakened immune systems, due to illness (such as HIV or leukaemia), medications, poor nutrition and hygiene.
- Patients using catheters or intravenous lines.
- Pregnant women.

Treat it

Once diagnosed, treatment will follow four basic steps:

1 **Antibiotics** These need to be given intravenously as soon as possible to fight the infection.

2 **Oxygen therapy** This is to ensure your organs are getting the O2 they need.

3 **Fluids** This will help raise your blood pressure and get it flowing around your body.

4 **Remove the cause** For example, if an abscess is causing the infection, it will need to be drained.

The power of prevention

'Sepsis is not Russian roulette. There are measures we can take to reduce our chances of developing the illness,' explains Dr Foster.

- Make sure you are vaccinated. This includes flu vaccines, as any infection could end up causing sepsis, and chest illnesses are a common cause.
- Treat infections, such as urinary tract ones, promptly. This stops the infection spreading and becoming harder to treat.
- Clean cuts properly. This will stop bacteria contaminating it and encourage healing.

FOR MORE INFORMATION FROM DR JEFF FOSTER, VISIT TFJPRIVATEGP.CO.UK; FOLLOW HIM ON TWITTER @JEFFTFJ OR EMAIL HIM AT JEFF.FOSTER@TFJPRIVATEGP.CO.UK

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