

Sepsis: Treatment & The Hospital Journey

by Dr. Karuna Kumar, Haematologist

The First Steps in the Hospital

When a patient with a suspected blood infection arrives at the hospital, time is critical. The medical team acts quickly to confirm the infection and start treatment, often before all test results are back.

- Initial Tests:** Before starting treatment, doctors will draw blood for several important tests:
 - Blood Cultures:** To identify the specific bacteria or fungus causing the infection.
 - CRP (C-Reactive Protein) & Procalcitonin:** These are markers of inflammation and infection severity.
 - Urine Cultures:** To check for a urinary source of the infection.
- Starting Antibiotics:** The most crucial first step is starting **intravenous (IV) broad-spectrum antibiotics**. These powerful drugs target a wide range of common bacteria. This is done immediately, even before the culture results are known, because any delay can be dangerous. The choice of antibiotic may differ for patients with very weak immune systems (immunocompromised).

The Patient's Journey: What to Expect

Recovery from sepsis is a journey with several stages. It is rarely a straight line, and patience is key for both the patient and their family.

The First 2-4 Days: The Critical Window

- Waiting for a Response:** It typically takes **two to four days** to see if the initial antibiotics are working. Immediate improvement is uncommon. Doctors closely monitor the patient's vital signs (blood pressure, heart rate, oxygen levels) and infection markers.
- Potential for Worsening:** If the infection is severe or was caught late, the patient's condition may worsen before it gets better. This can be a very stressful time for families.

Progression to Severe Sepsis or Septic Shock

If the infection is not controlled, the patient may progress to a more critical state. This is a sign that the body's organs are struggling.

- **Low Blood Pressure (Hypotension):** The patient may require powerful medications to support their blood pressure.
- **Increased Oxygen Needs:** The patient may need high levels of oxygen through a mask or even require a ventilator to help them breathe.
- **ICU Admission:** At this stage, the patient will be cared for in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) for constant monitoring and life support.

Even in this critical situation, there is still hope. The medical team will work to control the source of the infection, potentially change antibiotics, and support the body's functions. If the patient's need for oxygen, ventilator, and blood pressure support continues to increase, it is considered a poor sign, but recovery is still possible.

Emotional and Behavioral Changes

An ICU stay is a physically and emotionally traumatic experience. The combination of isolation, pain, noise, and powerful medications can lead to significant mental stress.

- **Post-ICU Stress:** It is common for patients to experience emotional or behavioral changes after leaving the ICU. This can include crying spells, withdrawal, confusion, or even child-like behavior.
- **Reassurance is Key:** This condition, often part of Post-Intensive Care Syndrome (PICS), usually improves within one to two weeks. The most important treatment is reassurance, a calm environment, and strong emotional support from family.

This guide provides general information and is not a substitute for professional medical advice. The journey through sepsis is unique for every patient. Always communicate with the medical team for updates on your loved one's condition.