



Each year 215,000 Americans die of a condition that most people have never heard of.

The condition is called sepsis. Some of its symptoms – fever, chills and weakness – could easily be confused with the flu. However, they could indicate something far more dangerous.

Anthony Grello, D.O., is an emergency physician at Cape Fear Valley Medical Center's Emergency Department.

"Sepsis is a very serious illness caused by the body's response to an infection," he said. "It contributes to as many as half of all hospital deaths."

An injury, such as a burn or cut, can lead to sepsis. So can a less obvious infection, such as pneumonia or a urinary tract infection. Even a simple paper cut can become infected and lead to sepsis.

Sepsis can progress rapidly, leading to widespread inflammation. This can result in leaky vessels, blood clots and a drop in blood pressure, which leads to decreased blood flow to major body organs depriving them of oxygen and nutrients. Organ failure quickly follows and may lead to death.

Dr. Grello says that early detection of sepsis is the key to a positive outcome.

"Evidence-based medicine has shown that if we identify sepsis early and start treatment, we can halt this deadly process in its tracks," he said. "This in turn causes better outcomes and saves lives."

Cape Fear Valley Medical Center recently became the first hospital in the state to receive Disease Specific Care Certification for the treatment of Sepsis from The Joint Commission. Bladen County Hospital, another health system hospital, also received certification for Disease Specific Care in Sepsis. Bladen County Hospital is the only critical access hospital in the United States to earn the distinction. The certification is a symbol of quality that reflects the organization's commitment to meeting certain performance standards.

Cheryl Colvin, M.D., is also a Cape Fear Valley Emergency Department physician. She has seen many patients arrive with abnormal vital signs that could indicate sepsis, such as an elevated white blood cell count, fever or low temperature.

"It is for this reason we started this comprehensive program in Cumberland County and the surrounding communities," said Dr. Colvin. "We always say, 'suspect sepsis.'"

Dr. Grello says that Cape Fear Valley Emergency Department's medical team looks for certain values to determine if the patient may be septic. If so, they begin the sepsis protocol immediately.

This protocol includes labs and IV hydration. Once labs are drawn, antibiotics are begun.

"If infection is even suspected," Dr. Grello said, "we'll give broad spectrum antibiotics so that we can treat any infection while we find out what is causing the problem."

Anyone can get sepsis. However, some are considered at higher risk. These include people who:

- Have a weakened immune system
- Are 65 or older
- Have a chronic disease such as diabetes, AIDS, cancer or kidney disease
- Have severe burns or trauma
- Have a long-term catheter

Signs of sepsis include fever or low body temperature, chills, rapid breathing, rapid heart rate, confusion, decreased urine or dark-colored urine, weakness or lightheadedness and skin color changes.

Many symptoms of sepsis mimic other illnesses, which makes sepsis difficult to diagnose in the early stages. If you experience any of these symptoms and they become severe, take Dr. Colvin's advice. "Suspect sepsis," and follow up with your physician immediately.



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