Asbury United Methodist Church

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Sepsis

Backdoor Reading From Your Parish Nurse

The Little –Known Killer of 375,000Americans a Year

Sepsis is a potentially life-threatening condition that occurs when the body's immune system overreacts to any type of infection. Sepsis damages body tissues and can harm vital organs if it is not treated promptly. Anyone can develop sepsis, but people with compromised immunity, older adults, critically ill hospital patients and those with invasive devices, such as breathing tubes and catheters, are at greater risk.

Causes: Inflammation is one of the body's defenses. When you develop an infection-such as the flu, a urinary tract infection or even an infected cut—the immune system releases inflammatory mediators and other substances that destroy pathogens, increase blood flow to the area and initiate healing. Sepsis occurs when this normal local response goes awry, for reasons that still aren't clear. Inflammation rapidly spreads throughout the body, disturbing normal physiologic processes and compromising function of vital organs, such as the heart and kidneys. Sepsis is always an emergency.

Who's at risk: Hospitalized patients, particularly those in ICU's who have invasive devices, such as urinary catheters, have a high risk of developing sepsis. Any bacterial or viral infection can progress to sepsis. Those easily treated with antibiotics, such as bladder or skin infections rarely lead to sepsis. Viruses that cause the common cold rarely cause it, but the flu virus can.

Sepsis is diagnosed according to clinical signs that accompany an infection, such as fever (above 101.3F), rapid heart rate (higher than 90 beats/minute) and rapid breathing. In severe cases, patients may have decreased urine output and platelet count, difficulty breathing, heart irregularities, including abnormal heart rhythms. When sepsis is suspected, a culture is typically performed to identify the organism causing the patient's infection. If it's a bacterial infection, the culture helps identify the organism causing the patient's infection & the most effective antibiotics. Treating the underlying infection helps curb the inflammatory process that led to sepsis. Regardless of the cause, sepsis is life threatening, so it is always treated in the hospital with IV fluids and other drugs.

Preventing Sepsis

- Clean cuts and burns thoroughly: Wash them 1-3 times daily using soap and water, followed by antibiotic ointment.
- Don't ignore mucus: You're unlikely to get sepsis from a mild upper respiratory infection, but it's not impossible, particularly if you develop a secondary bacterial infection in the sinuses, lungs etc. A telltail sign is foul-smelling mucus.
- Preventive antibiotics for people who have had joint replacement surgery have a higher than average risk for infection because bacteria can proliferate on foreign matter in the body, including the materials used to make artificial joints.
- Get a Flu vaccine in the fall: Important for adults over 65, people with chronic illness, pregnant women, health care workers or if you have a a compromised immunity.