Sepsis Recognition in the Pharmacy

UK Sepsis Trust (2023) | NICE NG51 (updated 2024)

ACTION: Call 999 Immediately

- ☐ Confusion, difficulty staying awake, or reduced level of consciousness with infection
- ☐ Fast, laboured, or shallow breathing; unable to speak in full sentences
- ☐ Mottled, pale, blue-tinged, cold, or clammy skin
- ☐ Non-blanching rash anywhere on the body
- ☐ Passing much less urine than usual, or no urine for many hours
- ☐ Appears critically unwell or deteriorating rapidly, especially if out of proportion to reported symptoms
- ☐ Child: difficult to wake, floppy, not feeding, fewer wet nappies, grunting, breathing difficulties, or non-blanching rash

Do not ask the patient to make their own way to hospital. Call 999 and do not leave them alone.

SEPSIS: Pharmacy Recognition Framework

S	**Seriously unwell appearance**	Looks much worse than expected. Trust your instinct: appearance before observations.
E	**Evidence of organ involvement**	Confusion, difficulty staying awake, reduced urine output, or breathlessness at rest.
P	**Physiological changes**	Persistent tachycardia, low blood pressure, elevated or increasing respiratory rate, or rigors.
S	**Skin signs**	Mottled, pale, blue-tinged, or clammy skin. Non-blanching rash anywhere on the body.
I	**Infection plus risk factors**	High-risk: older adult, immunocompromised, pregnant, recent surgery, recent hospital discharge, or invasive device.
S	**Send urgently**	999 if critically unwell. Same-day GP or 111 if concerning but stable.

ACTION: Refer Same-Day (GP or 111)

- ☐ Infection worsening despite 48 hours of prescribed antibiotics
- ☐ Elderly patient or care home resident with any new infection
- ☐ Immunocompromised: chemotherapy, biological medicines, long-term steroids, transplant, or splenectomy
- ☐ Poorly controlled diabetes with infection
- ☐ Recent surgery, recent hospital discharge, or invasive device (catheter, IV line)
- ☐ Pregnant with suspected infection and any systemic symptoms
- ☐ Rigors (severe shaking chills) with any infection

If clinical concern remains high despite the absence of classic red flags, arrange urgent assessment regardless.

ACTION: OTC Self-Care Appropriate

- ☐ Mild, localised infection only (no systemic signs)
- ☐ Patient alert, orientated, and comfortable at rest
- ☐ Not in a high-risk group
- ☐ Safety-net: return urgently if confusion, rigors, fast breathing, weakness, or feeling much worse

Key reminders: Sepsis is not diagnosed in pharmacy: it is recognised and escalated. Sepsis can occur at a normal temperature, particularly in older adults and immunocompromised patients. Trust your instinct: a patient who appears much more unwell than expected should be escalated even if observations are not markedly abnormal. Normal pulse oximetry and temperature do not exclude sepsis.