

# Sepsis | Mate whakatāoke: Recognition, diagnosis, and early management guidelines

How to identify and initiate treatment for patients with suspected or confirmed sepsis, within the holistic framework of Te Whare Tapa Whā.

## Who are these guidelines for?

Clinical teams at Southern Cross Healthcare.

## Why is this information important?

Early recognition and intervention are essential in the treatment of sepsis as it is a life-threatening condition that can be difficult to detect in its early stages. Identifying patients at risk and managing their physical health is therefore critical in saving lives.

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## Balancing clinical judgement and holistic care

This document reflects the balance between clinical guidance and the holistic care approach of [Te Whare Tapa Whā](#), promoting interconnected health across physical, spiritual, familial, and mental domains.

While designed to support timely and effective care, the guidelines below do not replace clinical judgement. Cultural safety and tikanga (customs and practices) must be respected and always maintained.

## Taha tinana | Physical health

Sepsis is a life-threatening condition characterised by organ dysfunction caused by a dysregulated response to infection.

### Criteria for identifying patients at risk of sepsis:

Patients may be at risk if they exhibit two or more of the following symptoms:

- **Hypotension:** SBP  $\leq$  100 mmHg
- **Altered mental status:** GCS  $<$  15
- **Tachypnoea:** RR  $\geq$  22

For patients with an EWS (Early Warning Score) of 3 or higher, or who appear critically ill, always consider: **'Could this be sepsis?'**

### Actions:

- Increase nursing observations and escalate care if needed.
- Conduct thorough clinical examinations, complete lactate measurements and send blood and urine cultures to the lab before administering antibiotics.

- **Review and complete the relevant sepsis screening and action tool.** Sepsis can only be excluded through completion of the tool – document the critical thinking that has occurred
- **Answer screening tool questions and implement necessary actions.**
- **If Sepsis Six (red flag or amber after clinician discussion) is required, actions must be taken within one hour.** Time is critical.
  - [Sepsis screening tool - Adult \(>15 years\)](#)
  - [Sepsis screening tool - Paediatric \(<15 years\)](#)
- Use standing orders for oxygen therapy and intravenous fluids when necessary.

For patients with suspected sepsis:

- Increase nursing observations to at least hourly or align with the [Adult observations and use of Early Warning Score \(EWS\) policy](#) or the [Paediatric observation chart and Early Warning Score \(EWS\) policy](#).
- Conduct a thorough clinical examination to identify infection sources, tailored to the patient's clinical history and examination findings decisions, or escalate care if needed.
- Alert CNS, clinical nurse led or senior nurse on-call for support and guidance.
- Consider transferring patients to higher-level care if necessary.
- Complete lactate measurement and send urgent blood/urine and blood cultures to the laboratory.
  - Ensure blood cultures are taken before administering antibiotics.
  - Follow blood culture collection procedures and sepsis antibiotic empiric guidelines.
  - Consider source control – arrange urine analysis, chest x-ray, and further imaging if required, investigate other possible infection sources (sputum, wound, faecal, drain output, IV site) and obtain relevant samples.
- For patients remaining in SCH facilities, follow models of care for high dependency care and adult monitoring guidelines.
  - Follow [Transfer of patients between healthcare facilities procedure](#) when required as needed.

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## Taha wairua | Spiritual health

Spiritual wellbeing is central to recovery and is closely tied to both the patient's and whānau sense of identity and connection to their culture. Ensuring spiritual care can be as important as managing physical symptoms.

### Cultural safety

Ensure all care provided is culturally safe. Recognising the early signs and symptoms of sepsis may save lives, particularly for Māori and Pacific peoples, who are overrepresented in sepsis cases.

This highlights the need for *ōritetanga* (equity), which calls for vigilant assessment and immediate intervention, including offering interpreters when required.

Involve kaumātua (elders) or cultural advisors when needed to support spiritual health, ensuring the patient and their whānau feel safe.

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## Taha whānau | Family health

In [Te Whare Tapa Whā](#), family plays a significant role in the health and wellbeing of the patient. Sepsis care should involve whānau in decision making, ensuring they understand the situation and can contribute to care.

### Whanaungatanga

- Patients and their whānau must be involved in all discussions.
- Provide information in plain language, ensuring that decisions about care are informed by patient values and preferences.
- Discuss the potential need for care escalation with patients and whānau, involving them in decisions regarding the transfer to higher-level care if needed.

### Manaakitanga

- Demonstrate care, compassion, and support for patients and whānau, especially when there is a requirement to act quickly if sepsis is suspected.
- Ensuring whānau are kept informed about plan of care and the patient's condition.

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## Taha hinengaro | Mental health

Mental health is essential to a patient's overall wellbeing, and experiencing sepsis can be traumatic for both the patient and their whānau. Maintaining clear communication and offering psychological support throughout the care process is critical.

## Mental health and communication

- Address the patient's mental well-being by ensuring that they understand their condition and plan of care. This includes clear explanations and reassurance to alleviate anxiety or confusion.
- For patients with altered mental status, ensure regular monitoring and assessments, recognizing that these changes may be due to sepsis or other factors.

For children, consider that sepsis can present atypically due to their stronger compensatory mechanisms. Provide mental support to both the child and their caregivers, explaining the care process in an age-appropriate manner.

## Kāwanatanga and education requirements

These guidelines have been reviewed by the National Māori Nurse Advisor and the National Māori advisory rōpū: Te Tira Rearea o Māhutonga, ensuring that they meet both clinical and cultural safety standards.

## Nurses' cultural competency

- All nurses caring for sepsis patients must complete cultural safety training.
- Clinical staff must complete the sepsis education module to recognise, assess, and treat sepsis effectively.
- Completion of the National Vital Signs and Early Warning Scoring Chart learning package is a prerequisite.

## A holistic approach

Incorporating the [Te Whare Tapa Whā model](#) into the recognition and management of sepsis ensures that patients are treated with a focus on whānau, tinana, wairua, and hinengaro, promoting holistic care that aligns with cultural practices.

This ensures not only physical recovery but also the restoration of spiritual, familial, and mental wellbeing

## Associated documents

### **Adult observations and use of Early Warning Score (EWS) policy**

Describes the requirements for vital sign monitoring and early detection of patient deterioration.

### **Paediatric observation chart and Early Warning Score (EWS) policy**

Outlines minimum monitoring and observation requirements for patients under 16 years of age undergoing elective surgical procedures at Southern Cross hospitals.

### **Sepsis screening tool - Adult**

To be applied to all non-pregnant adults and children over 15 years with fever (or recent fever) symptoms, or who are clearly unwell with any abnormal observations [Source: Sepsis Trust NZ].

### **Sepsis screening tool - Paediatric**

To be applied to all patients under 15 years of age [Source: Sepsis Trust NZ].

### **Transfer of patients between healthcare facilities procedure**

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