

# Tennessee Hospitals Improve Awareness, Screening, Fast Action to #StopSepsis

## One in three patients who die in a hospital have sepsis.

That sobering statistic from the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) underscores the ever-present danger from sepsis – the body's extreme response to infection. Often called the silent killer, many of the early symptoms and signs are easily confused with other conditions. Yet, any delay in recognizing the red flags and starting immediate treatment can lead to devastating results. With sepsis, every second counts.



Hospitals working with the Tennessee Center for Patient Safety (TCPS), a division of the Tennessee Hospital Association (THA), have taken a statewide leadership role to help raise awareness of the critical dangers of sepsis among both the general population and healthcare providers. A series of presentations, conferences, videos and other

resources have been made available to assist hospitals and health systems statewide in reducing sepsis mortality rates. By sharing effective early recognition tools, standardized treatment protocols and successful educational programming from colleagues across Tennessee, the state has cut mortality rates by 41 percent and made great strides to #StopSepsis.

## Increasing Awareness

The THA Sepsis Collaborative, a group of 77 healthcare professionals from 45 hospitals, generated ideas to improve awareness among both healthcare providers and the general population and took a lead role in launching a statewide education campaign. To bolster those efforts, TCPS developed a media toolkit, which included fact sheets, a "Faces of Sepsis" educational poster for hospital and community display, videos and other collateral materials.

While the work to increase sepsis awareness is an ongoing task, those efforts take on special significance each September. During Sepsis Awareness Month, TCPS joins healthcare organizations around the world to shine a spotlight on the condition to further efforts to #StopSepsis. In 2019, 37 Tennessee hospitals hosted a range of activities from distributing flyers in the community and posting information on social media to hosting staff events and educational rounding for clinicians. In addition to the robust social media campaign, a number of hospitals were successful in generating local television and print coverage to increase public awareness.

Tennova Harton in Tullahoma featured "Sepsis Superheroes" to share educational information by highlighting serious points in a lighthearted manner that resonated with staff and the general public. Starr Regional Medical Center in Athens created a fun video with physicians and staff sharing parody song lyrics to underscore the need for closely following a sepsis plan that accompanied the rollout of new inpatient sepsis tools and protocol. Erlanger Baroness reached out to the community by distributing sepsis information at the local farmer's market. Sumner Regional Medical Center held a 'Lunch and Learn' event for the community and staff. And Maury Regional Medical Center staff donned 'Sepsis Avenger' t-shirts, while those at Regional One Health became "Sepsis Warriors," to spark conversation and teach patients and families about the deadly condition. Cookeville Regional Medical Center even featured a sepsis video game for interactive patient and family education.

As part of their multimedia campaign, THA rolled out a series of informative videos explaining how sepsis occurs, highlighting warning signs, and discussing the critical importance of timing. Personal reflections from healthcare providers impacted by sepsis underscore just how easy it is to miss early warning signs ... even among industry professionals.

Barbara Martin, RN, BSN, MBA, a leader in Vanderbilt University Medical Center's Quality, Safety and Risk Prevention department, reflected on a close call for her best friend. The friend, an experienced nurse, thought she had the flu. As her symptoms worsened, Martin insisted her friend go to Vanderbilt's

Emergency Department where she was quickly assessed for severe sepsis, admitted to the Medical ICU and remained hospitalized for more than two weeks while recovering. "My friend was an experienced critical care nurse," said Martin. "She knew about sepsis. She'd cared for hundreds of patients with sepsis yet didn't recognize the signs and symptoms when she had them herself."

Similarly, Henry County Medical Center Compliance Officer and Director of Quality Judy Faris, RN, has a new outlook on sepsis after she came dangerously close to death just weeks before her daughter's wedding. "I was always really good about getting my husband or kids to the doctor ... but as a nurse, I tended to try to wait it out," she said. After several days of dizziness and achiness, Faris went to an urgent care clinic and was diagnosed with a severe urinary tract infection. Given antibiotics, she was told to go to the ER if she didn't start feeling better. The next morning, things were worse.

By the time Farris arrived at the hospital, her temperature had risen to 104 degrees. She was experiencing severe nausea and dizziness and had a blood pressure reading with a systolic figure in the 90s. She credits the fast action of the ER team at Henry County Medical Center in diagnosing severe sepsis and starting immediate treatment with saving her life. "It does totally change your perspective as a caregiver when you realize not only how important it is to give the right care but to give it in a timely manner," she said. "Sepsis occurs more often than people realize."

## Ongoing Efforts

The Tennessee Center for Patient Safety continues the push to improve sepsis protocols and education. Going into 2020, TCPS and the Sepsis Collaborative identified the need to increase year-round outreach to the public, particularly those who touch vulnerable groups including the staff and volunteers of senior centers, churches, schools and daycare facilities.

Similarly, efforts are underway to extend outreach to community care partners, including first responders and caregivers in the home health, rehabilitation and skilled nursing setting. Outreach to these professionals expands the healthcare team on the lookout for the early signs of sepsis beyond the hospital walls. Helping pave the way for this type of outreach, Holston Valley Medical Center distributed sepsis information at the 9/11 memorial stair-climb for first responders in 2019.

Raising awareness among the general population ... and creating a sense of urgency about accessing care ... is a critical component in the continued efforts to lower mortality rates. "For each hour delay in medical treatment, mortality increases 8 percent for sepsis," says Theresa Harris, post-acute care education coordinator for Maury Regional Medical Center. A 2018 sepsis analysis found the mortality rate for those in later stages of sepsis at 33.01 percent compared to a mortality rate of 5.66 percent for those diagnosed in the early stages.

By taking a multi-pronged approach, Tennessee has successfully seen a drop in sepsis mortality from 18.44 percent in the baseline calendar year 2014 to 10.8 percent after the first three quarters of 2019. "While we celebrate our success, there is even more we want to do," said Rhonda Dickman, MSN, RN, CPHQ, clinical quality improvement specialist for TCPS.

For more information on effective sepsis strategies and outreach programming, go online to [tnpatientsafety.com/initiatives/sepsis](http://tnpatientsafety.com/initiatives/sepsis) or reach out to Rhonda Dickman at [rdickman@tha.com](mailto:rdickman@tha.com).

*The Tennessee Center for Patient Safety, a department of the Tennessee Hospital Association, develops and shares hospital and health system success stories and promotes best practices.*

