Infection danger signs

When should you refer a patient?

Field module · English · 10-minute exercise

27 November 2026 · For Kawan Sehat community health agents

Recognise when a patient is getting worse, contact a healthcare worker and arrange transport to care quickly.

What to remember

One danger sign is enough to start an emergency referral.

Serious infection can occur without a high fever.

A falling temperature does not guarantee that the patient is recovering.

If the journey is long, arrange help early.

> ### Act as soon as you see one danger sign
>
> **New confusion, difficulty waking, seizures, severe breathing difficulty or inability to drink are danger signs.**
>
> Kawan Sehat agents recognise emergencies and help patients reach care. Start the referral as soon as you recognise a danger sign.

A quick check for every patient

Alertness: Are they responding as usual? **Breathing:** Is it difficult or very fast?
Fluids: Can they drink or breastfeed? **Urine:** Are they passing much less?
Change: Have they worsened since you last checked or since yesterday?

01. Refer immediately if you see one danger sign

Look at the patient, listen to the family and compare with how the patient usually behaves. Check more than the temperature. [1, 2, 3]

Change in alertness

New confusion, difficulty waking, unconsciousness or a seizure during this illness.

Difficulty breathing

Severe breathing difficulty, inability to speak because of breathlessness, blue lips, or marked chest indrawing in a child.

Poor circulation or severe weakness

Very pale, cold and clammy skin, fainting, or being too weak to stand.

Unable to drink or breastfeed

Unable to swallow safely, or vomiting everything they drink.

Much less urine

Passing much less urine than usual or none at all, especially with weakness or worsening illness.

Severe pain or rapid deterioration

Very severe pain, fever with a stiff neck, unusual bleeding, or rapid deterioration.

> ### Children and young infants
>
> **Children:** Unable to drink or breastfeed, vomiting everything, seizures, or difficulty waking are general danger signs.
>
> **Infants under 2 months:** Fever, feeling unusually cold, feeding less or moving less require immediate assessment. [2, 3]

Sepsis occurs when the body’s response to an infection disrupts organ function. These signs can also occur in other serious illnesses. Arrange emergency care for any of them. [1]

02. What to do while arranging referral

Follow the local Puskesmas referral route to a facility that can handle emergencies. Give first aid within your training while transport is being arranged.

1. Call for help and arrange transport now

Tell the Puskesmas or healthcare worker the danger signs and estimated travel time. If you cannot reach them, follow the local emergency referral plan.

2. Stay with the patient

Make sure someone stays with the patient while waiting and during the journey. Monitor alertness and breathing.

3. Help the patient into a safe position

If breathless, let them take the position in which they breathe most easily. If unconscious but breathing normally, place them safely on their side.

4. Check whether the patient can swallow safely

Give nothing by mouth if the patient is less alert, seizing or unable to swallow safely. If fully awake, able to swallow and without severe breathlessness, offer small sips.

5. Act if breathing is abnormal or absent

If the patient is unresponsive and breathing is absent or abnormal, including gasping, call for help and start resuscitation as trained.

6. Give a brief handover

Record the patient's name, age, symptoms, when they worsened, medicines given and any measurements already available.

> ### Leave as soon as transport is ready
>
> Do not wait to enter the case in the app, receive a WhatsApp reply, get a test result or see whether fever medicine works.
>
> **Give pre-referral medicines only as permitted by Kawan Sehat training and local protocol.**

Handover example. "The patient is ___ years old and has been ill since ___. The danger sign is ___. We gave ___. We are leaving from ___ and expect to arrive in ___."

03. Arrange assessment today if there are no danger signs

People at higher risk. Fever in someone who is pregnant, has recently given birth, is a frail older adult or has a weakened immune system.

Wound infection. Increasing redness or swelling, pus, or spreading redness.

Persistent symptoms. Fever that continues or returns, or increasing weakness.

In malaria areas

For fever or a history of fever without a clear cause, arrange assessment and malaria testing that day. **A negative malaria test does not rule out another serious illness.** If a danger sign is present, start referral immediately. [4]

04. When the patient can be cared for at home

Follow local protocol. The patient should have no danger signs, be alert, breathe comfortably and be able to drink. Explain the danger signs to the family and agree on a recheck by the next day. **If the patient worsens, seek assessment before the planned recheck.**

Practice case

Case. The patient had a fever yesterday. Today the temperature is lower, but the patient is confused and struggling to breathe. Would you wait until tomorrow?

Refer immediately. Changes in alertness and difficulty breathing are danger signs.

References

1. WHO. Sepsis.
2. Kementerian Kesehatan RI. IMCI signs and symptoms.
3. WHO/UNICEF. IMCI general danger signs in children.
4. WHO. Guidelines for malaria, 13 August 2025.

Sources accessed 27 November 2026. Select a title to open the source.

Use this guide within your training and scope of practice. Follow the local Puskesmas protocol and referral route.