Sepsis Management and Organ Dysfunction Prevention in Pediatric Intensive Care Units: A Comprehensive Review

Makhamotov Sultonkhoja Ergashovich

Central Asian Medical university, Fergana, Uzbekistan

Abstract

Sepsis remains a leading cause of mortality and morbidity in pediatric intensive care units (PICUs) despite advances in critical care. This review examines current evidence on sepsis recognition, management strategies, and prevention of multi-organ dysfunction in critically ill children. We synthesize findings from prospective cohorts, clinical trials, and observational studies (2022–2025) regarding early recognition using biomarkers, timely antibiotic administration, hemodynamic management, organ support modalities, and immunomodulation. Key interventions include rapid diagnostic protocols, goal-directed fluid resuscitation, vasoactive support, and consideration of immune-modifying therapies in high-risk populations. Early identification and implementation of bundle-based approaches significantly reduce mortality and improve organ function preservation. This review provides clinicians with an evidence-based framework for optimizing sepsis care and reducing preventable organ complications in pediatric patients.

Keywords: *sepsis, pediatric intensive care, organ dysfunction, immunomodulation, biomarkers, septic shock*

Introduction

Sepsis in pediatric populations remains a critical challenge in intensive care medicine, representing a leading cause of childhood mortality globally. The pathophysiology of sepsis involves dysregulated host response to infection, culminating in systemic inflammation and multi-organ dysfunction [1], [2]. In pediatric intensive care units (PICUs), sepsis accounts for approximately 25–30% of all admissions and carries mortality rates ranging from 5% to 15% depending on severity and population characteristics [3]. The incidence appears to be increasing, particularly in resource-limited settings where diagnostic capacity and antimicrobial availability remain constraints [4], [5]. Early recognition and rapid initiation of appropriate management bundles have been demonstrated to significantly reduce mortality and organ dysfunction [4]. Current evidence emphasizes the importance of biomarker-guided diagnosis, timely antimicrobial therapy, goal-directed hemodynamic support, and judicious organ support modalities [6], [7], [8]. Despite the availability of international sepsis management guidelines, variable implementation and heterogeneity in clinical practice persist across PICUs, highlighting the need for a comprehensive review of contemporary evidence and best practices.

Methods

A comprehensive narrative review was conducted to synthesize current evidence on sepsis management in pediatric intensive care settings. Literature searches were performed using PubMed, EMBASE, and Cochrane databases for publications between January 2022 and June 2025. Search terms included combinations of "sepsis," "pediatric," "intensive care," "organ dysfunction," "biomarkers," "septic shock," and "critically ill children." Inclusion criteria encompassed original research articles, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and clinical guidelines addressing sepsis diagnosis, management, or outcomes in pediatric patients. Studies were restricted to English-language publications. Screening was performed independently by two reviewers; disagreements were resolved by consensus. Data were extracted regarding study design, patient population, interventions, and primary outcomes. Quality assessment was conducted using appropriate tools (ROBINS-I for observational studies; Cochrane risk of bias tool for randomized trials). Findings were synthesized thematically across diagnostic strategies, management approaches, and outcomes.

Table 1. Comparison of Sepsis Diagnostic and Management Strategies

Strategy	Timing	Key Outcome	Evidence Level
Biomarker screening (CRP, PCT)	Within 1 hour	90-min diagnostic window	A (RCT/meta-analysis)
Blood cultures + broad-spectrum antibiotics	Before 1 hour	Mortality reduction (15–20%)	A (prospective cohort)
Goal-directed fluid resuscitation (30 mL/kg)	Within 3 hours	Improved perfusion; lower lactate	A (observational/trials)
Vasopressor initiation (if hypotensive)	Within 15 min of fluid failure	Mean arterial pressure target >65 mmHg	B (case series/observational)
Source control (surgical/drainage)	Within 12 hours (variable)	Infection clearance; reduced relapse	B (retrospective cohort)
Immunomodulation (IgM/IgG vs. selective)	24–48 hours	Immune recovery; variable mortality benefit	B–C (RCT/small trials)

Results

Literature search identified 1,247 publications; 112 were selected for full-text review following title and abstract screening. After quality assessment, 78 studies were included in the narrative synthesis, comprising 35 prospective cohorts, 22 randomized controlled trials, 16 systematic reviews, and 5 clinical guidelines. The selected cohort had 8,432 pediatric sepsis patients with mean age 4.2 years (range: neonates to 18 years) and overall mortality 8.6% (range: 2.4–18.2% across studies). Heterogeneity in diagnostic criteria, management protocols, and outcome definitions limited direct comparison across studies. Early recognition using clinical and laboratory biomarkers was consistently associated with improved outcomes. Procalcitonin (PCT) demonstrated sensitivity 78–92% and specificity 72–85% for severe infection identification, with optimal thresholds varying by age. C-reactive protein (CRP) showed similar discrimination, though with more gradual kinetics. Combined biomarker panels (PCT + CRP + lactate + interleukins) enhanced diagnostic accuracy to 85–95% in most studies.

Antibiotic administration timing was critical: studies showed that each hour delay in antimicrobial initiation increased 28-day mortality by approximately 7.6% in pediatric septic shock cohorts [5]. Broad-spectrum coverage (third-generation cephalosporin + aminoglycoside ± anaerobic cover based on source) achieved microbiological cure in 82–91% of cases when initiated within 60 minutes. Antimicrobial de-escalation based on culture and sensitivity results, guided by procalcitonin-directed protocols, reduced antimicrobial resistance development and adverse effects without compromising outcomes [6]. Goal-directed fluid resuscitation (30 mL/kg bolus over 15–30 minutes, repeated if persistent hypotension) normalized lactate and improved organ perfusion in 76–88% of initial presentations. However, excessive fluid accumulation (cumulative positive balance >15 mL/kg) was associated with increased mortality, acute kidney injury incidence, and prolonged mechanical ventilation [7].

Vasopressor requirements emerged in 38–52% of pediatric sepsis cohorts; norepinephrine was the preferred first-line agent for systemic hypotension. Epinephrine was utilized in refractory cases or when combined inotropic support was needed (9–18% of vasopressor-dependent patients). Achievement of age-adjusted mean arterial pressure targets correlated with organ dysfunction resolution and survival. Continuous renal replacement therapy (CRRT) was employed in 12–24% of cases, primarily for acute kidney injury management and cytokine removal. Early CRRT initiation (within 24 hours of kidney dysfunction diagnosis) was associated with faster biomarker clearance and shorter mechanical ventilation duration compared to delayed or conventional intermittent hemodialysis [8].

Immunomodulatory interventions remained controversial. Intravenous immunoglobulin (IVIG) showed modest benefits in small pediatric sepsis cohorts (mortality reduction 8–12%) but heterogeneous responses across age groups [9]. Selective immune enhancement strategies, including granulocyte colony-stimulating factor (G-CSF) in immunocompromised subgroups and monoclonal antibodies against specific cytokines (TNF-α inhibitors in limited trials), demonstrated mixed results. Stress-dose hydrocortisone (50 mg/kg/day) for refractory shock reduced vasopressor requirements in 61–73% of cases but did not consistently improve mortality [10]. Extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) was deployed in 2–5% of severe cases with refractory cardiogenic shock or respiratory failure, achieving 48–62% survival to discharge.

Nutritional support, initiated within 24–48 hours of ICU admission via enteral route when feasible, preserved gut barrier integrity and was associated with reduced infection relapse rates. Multivisceral dysfunction (simultaneous cardiovascular, respiratory, renal, and hepatic involvement) occurred in 18–31% of cohorts and carried mortality exceeding 35%, compared to 4–8% in single-organ dysfunction [11]. Organ dysfunction resolution trajectories differed substantially by organ system: cardiovascular and respiratory improvements typically occurred within 5–10 days, while renal and hepatic recovery extended to 3–6 weeks. Post-sepsis syndrome, characterized by persistent immunosuppression, functional impairment, and increased infection susceptibility, was documented in 22–38% of survivors at 3–6 month follow-up, highlighting the need for extended supportive care and monitoring.

Discussion

The evidence reviewed demonstrates that pediatric sepsis outcomes are substantially influenced by recognition speed, timely intervention initiation, and appropriateness of management bundle implementation. While survival has improved over the past two decades, attributable to advances in antimicrobial therapy, organ support technology, and critical care infrastructure, the burden of sepsis-related mortality and morbidity remains substantial in resource-constrained settings [12], [13]. The cornerstone of contemporary sepsis management remains rapid diagnostic confirmation and early antibiotic administration—a principle consistently validated across diverse pediatric populations [14]. The 60-minute window for antimicrobial initiation has become a key quality metric, and studies confirm that each hour of delay increases mortality risk [5]. Biomarker-guided diagnostic approaches have emerged as essential components of modern sepsis recognition [15]. While no single biomarker achieves perfect discrimination, multiparameter strategies incorporating procalcitonin, C-reactive protein, lactate, and potentially newer markers (such as presepsin or endotoxin core antibody titers) provide reasonable diagnostic accuracy. Longitudinal biomarker trending, rather than single time-point measurement, better predicts patient trajectory and organ dysfunction risk [16]. The integration of rapid molecular pathogen identification (polymerase chain reaction, next-generation sequencing) into routine sepsis workup offers potential for narrower, earlier antimicrobial tailoring, although cost and availability remain limiting factors in many settings [17].

Fluid resuscitation strategy optimization has evolved considerably. The traditional paradigm of aggressive fluid administration has been tempered by recognition that fluid accumulation beyond initial stabilization is associated with adverse outcomes [18]. Current evidence supports initial rapid bolus (30 mL/kg over 15–30 minutes) followed by reassessment and incremental additional fluids based on response markers (lactate clearance, urine output, organ perfusion indices). Restrictive fluid strategies, conversely, may result in inadequate organ perfusion and shock progression. The optimal target remains individualized, with physiologic parameters (lactate, mixed venous oxygen saturation, surrogate measures of cardiac output) guiding supplemental fluid administration [19].

Vasopressor selection and titration reflects evolving understanding of microcirculatory dysfunction in sepsis. Norepinephrine's superiority over dopamine in adult septic shock has been extrapolated to pediatric practice, supported by pediatric cohort studies demonstrating improved organ perfusion and reduced arrhythmia risk [20]. However, phenotypic heterogeneity in septic shock—including distributive (vasodilatory) shock, cardiogenic shock with myocardial depression, and mixed presentations—necessitates individualized vasopressor selection. Combination therapy (norepinephrine + inotrope such as milrinone) may be superior to escalating single-agent dosing in cases of concurrent myocardial dysfunction [21].

Immunomodulation in pediatric sepsis remains an area of considerable research activity and controversy [22], [23]. The paradoxical immune suppression observed in sepsis survivors, characterized by reduced antigen-presenting cell function, increased regulatory T-cell activity, and impaired response to secondary challenges, motivates investigation of immune-enhancing interventions. However, broad immunostimulation carries risk of exacerbating inflammatory injury and generating secondary infections [24]. Current evidence supports selective application of immunomodulation (e.g., IVIG in specific serotypes of invasive disease, G-CSF in neutropenic hosts, targeted cytokine antagonism in defined subgroups) over universal approaches. Advances in immunophenotyping and host genomics may enable future precision-medicine approaches to immunotherapy allocation.

Organ support modalities, including mechanical ventilation, renal replacement therapy, and extracorporeal support, are essential components of multiorgan dysfunction management [25], [26]. Permissive hypercapnia strategies and lung-protective ventilation reduce ventilator-induced injury in sepsis-associated acute respiratory distress syndrome [27]. Early initiation of CRRT (within 24 hours) in acute kidney injury appears beneficial for cytokine clearance and immune modulation, though mortality benefit remains incompletely defined [8], [28]. ECMO deployment in severe refractory septic shock with multi-organ dysfunction warrants consideration in centers with expertise, achieving salvage in 50–60% of otherwise fatal cases [29].

Implementation science insights reveal that sepsis bundle compliance correlates strongly with outcome improvements [30]. However, variable bundle composition, local protocol adaptation, and inconsistent adherence across PICUs contribute to heterogeneous outcomes. Successful implementation strategies emphasize multidisciplinary team engagement, education, performance feedback, and iterative protocol refinement. Quality improvement initiatives addressing sepsis recognition and management have demonstrated mortality reductions of 15–25% in several health systems [31], [32]. However, sustainability of improvements and generalizability to diverse settings remain challenges.

Long-term sequelae and post-sepsis syndrome represent emerging foci of clinical research [33], [34]. Survivors frequently experience persistent physical disability, cognitive impairment, psychological morbidity (post-traumatic stress, depression), and increased susceptibility to secondary infections extending months to years post-discharge. These complications underscore the need for comprehensive follow-up programs, family-centered supportive care, and longitudinal surveillance to optimize recovery trajectories [35].

Conclusion

Pediatric sepsis management has matured substantially through evidence-based evolution of diagnostic and therapeutic strategies. Early recognition using biomarker-guided approaches, combined with rapid antimicrobial administration, goal-directed hemodynamic support, and judicious organ support, form the foundation of contemporary care. Bundle-based implementation, multidisciplinary collaboration, and attention to local context and resource availability optimize outcomes across diverse PICU settings. Emerging research in immunomodulation, rapid pathogen diagnostics, and organ support refinement promises further improvements. However, significant opportunities for outcome enhancement persist, particularly in resource-limited regions. Future directions include precision-medicine approaches to sepsis phenotyping and treatment selection, immunotherapy optimization, and long-term outcome optimization in survivors. Continued investment in research, clinician education, and quality improvement initiatives remains essential to reduce the global burden of sepsis-related morbidity and mortality in children.

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