



Patient & Family Guide
2017

After the Intensive Care Unit (ICU)

QEII Department of
Critical Care
(3A and 5.2 ICU)



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After the ICU

Patients who are critically ill are admitted to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). These patients need more care than can be provided on the general wards or intermediate care units. Once these patients no longer need such intensive care, they are transferred out of the ICU.

Whether they are transferred to another nursing unit at the QEII, or to another health care facility, transfer out of the ICU is a major step towards recovery. The ICU health care team will decide when you are ready to transfer out of the ICU.

This booklet will help patients and families with the transition out of the ICU. It will also give some general information about recovery from critical illness.

Transferring out of the ICU

Nursing units outside of the ICU have different routines. Some patients and families find the transition to a new unit stressful. It can be hard to meet a new health care team and get used to new routines. Please don't worry! The staff in these units are used to caring for patients who are leaving the ICU. They will answer your questions and explain the routines of their unit (for example, timing and structure of the doctors' rounds, nursing care, mealtimes, and visiting hours).

Before you leave the ICU, we will give the staff on the new unit a detailed report about your condition and care. We will also answer any questions they may have.

Compared to the ICU, other units will have different nursing staff levels and equipment. During the ICU phase of critical illness, the ICU team is always nearby. As your condition improves and you transfer out of the ICU, less intensive care is needed. On the new nursing unit, nurses will be caring for more than one patient at a time. Patients will have a call bell they can use if they need to call a nurse. Patients will continue to receive care from other team members (such as respiratory therapists, social workers, physiotherapists, and spiritual care), as needed.

Recovery from critical illness

Each patient's recovery from critical illness is different. Recovery takes time, and depends on several factors, such as your level of health before hospitalization, the severity of your illness, medications received during your illness, and your goals for recovery. Some of the common problems that you may have after critical illness are described below.

Memory problems

Your illness and the medications that you received may cause your memory, particularly of your ICU stay, to be foggy, or you may have no memories at all. Family members are very important in helping you to 'fill in the blanks' about this time. You and your family may want to write down information about your ICU and hospital experience, creating a journal or diary.

Sleep

After critical illness, it is common to have problems sleeping. It may be hard to fall asleep or you may wake up often during the night. Some patients may have nightmares about their time in the ICU. This can be scary, and may continue after you go home. Please talk with your doctor or nurse about this.

Mood disturbances (e.g. depression or anxiety)

Critical illness is a very stressful experience, both physically and mentally. It is normal to feel some or all of these emotions and feelings:

- Tired, lacking energy, apathetic (not caring)
- Angry, quick-tempered, 'snappy'
- Not hungry, lack of appetite
- Upset, sad, tearful
- Scared, fearful
- Worried or anxious about illness, recovery, family, relationships, or job

These feelings are normal and should get better over time. It is important that you talk about your feelings and concerns with the health care team, and ask for help if needed. Treatments such as counselling or medications may help.

Keeping a journal or diary of your progress can help you focus on your achievements, and give you a place to write down any questions you'd like to ask your health care team.

Breathing

Patients often find their strength and ease of breathing is not as good as before their illness. Your health care team will be monitoring this. Sometimes patients need medications to help. The respiratory therapists and physiotherapists can also teach you exercises to strengthen and improve your breathing.

Patients sometimes find their voice sounds husky or raspy after being on a breathing machine. This usually goes away over time.

Weakness and pain

You may feel weak and tired. Your arms and legs may ache and feel heavy, your joints may feel stiff, and your muscles may feel weaker than before your illness. In the ICU, the team helped to get you moving. Talk with the health care team about the plan to help get or keep you moving in your new unit.

Patients may have pain for many reasons. It may have existed before the illness, or be a result of the illness. It is very important to tell your health care team about any pain you have so that it can be checked and treated. Most pain can be helped. Easing pain can help with your healing, and make it easier to stay active, sleep well, and socialize.

Body image

Critical illness can change your body's appearance quickly. Weight and muscle loss is common, as is swelling. Healthy food and exercise will help with this. You may have changes in your hair and skin; moisturizing can help. These changes are usually temporary. Your illness and treatment may cause scars and bruises on the skin; most of these will fade over time.

If you have any questions about changes in your body, please ask your health care team.

Family

Critical illness is stressful for both you and your family. You may feel worried, exhausted and stressed. Talking about the illness and sharing your experiences can help. Ask your health care team what support is available. Talking with professionals like a Social Worker or Spiritual Care staff can be helpful.

After you are discharged home, the effects of critical illness can still be felt by patients and families. This is called "Post-Intensive Care Syndrome".

Don't suffer alone – talk with your family doctor.

Some strategies to help with common problems while recovering from a critical illness:

- Ask lots of questions, and ask for help. Feel free to use the notes space on the next page, or your journal, to write down your questions.
- Share your experiences. Critical illness can have a major impact on patients and families. Remember: You are not alone!
- Eat healthy foods. This will help your body to heal.
- Sleep is important. Ask us about ways to improve your rest.
- Exercise is important for both your mind and body. It's not easy, but it is worth it. Talk with your health care team about how a physiotherapist or nurse can help.
- Keep a diary or journal of your memories and experiences. Track your improvements, and celebrate your achievements.

**What are your questions?
Please ask. We are here to help you.**

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For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

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The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years or as needed.