

Patient & Family Guide  
2020

# After the Intensive Care Unit (ICU)

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

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# After the ICU

The Intensive Care Unit (ICU) cares for patients who are critically ill. This means you need more care than can be provided on general units or intermediate care units. When you no longer need this level of care, you will be transferred out of the ICU.

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

This guide will help you and your family with the transition out of the ICU. It will also give some general information about recovering from a critical illness.

## Transferring out of the ICU

It is normal to find the transition to a new unit stressful. This is normal. Staff in these units are used to caring for patients who have left the ICU. They will answer your questions and explain the routines of the unit (for example, how doctors' rounds work and when they are, nursing care, mealtimes, and visiting hours).

Before you leave the ICU, we will give staff on your new unit a detailed report about your condition and care.

Other units will have different nursing staff levels and equipment than the ICU. On your new unit, nurses will be caring for more than one patient at a time. You will have a call bell if you need to call a nurse. You 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 person's recovery from critical illness is different. Recovery takes time and depends on several factors, such as your level of health before you went into the hospital, how severe (bad) your illness is, what medications you received during your illness, and your goals for recovery. Some of the common problems you may have after critical illness are described on the next pages.

## **Memory problems**

Your illness and the medications you received may cause your memories, 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 experiences by creating a journal or diary.

## **Sleep**

After critical illness, it is common to have trouble sleeping. It may be hard to fall asleep or you may wake up often during the night. You may have nightmares about your time in the ICU. This can be scary, and may continue after you go home. Please talk with your health care team about this.

## **Depression and/or anxiety**

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

- Tiredness, low energy, apathy (not caring)
- Anger, quick temper, ‘snappy’
- Upset, sad, tearful
- Scared, fearful
- Worried or anxious about your illness, recovery, family, relationships, or job
- Not hungry or eating more than usual

**These feelings are normal** and should get better over time. It is important that you talk about your feelings and concerns with your 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 success. It also gives you a place to write down any questions for your health care team.

## **Breathing**

Patients often find their breathing is not as good as before their illness. Your health care team will monitor this. You may need medication to help your breathing. The respiratory therapists and physiotherapists can also teach you exercises to strengthen and improve your breathing.

Your voice may sound 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 health care team helped to get you moving. Talk with your team about the plan to help get or keep you moving in your new unit.

You may have pain for many reasons. You may have had it before your illness, or it may 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 your pain can help with healing, and make it easier to stay active, sleep, and socialize.

## **Body image**

Critical illness can quickly change the appearance of your body. 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 usually go away over time. Your illness and treatment may cause scars and bruises on your 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 may be stressful for both you and your family. You may feel worried, exhausted, and stressed. Talking about your illness and sharing your experiences can help. Ask your health care team what supports are available. It may help to talk with a professional such as a social worker or spiritual care staff.

After you are discharged home, you and your family may still feel the effects of critical illness. This is called “Post-intensive Care Syndrome”.

**Don’t suffer alone** — talk with your primary health care provider.

## **Ways 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 your health care team about ways to improve your rest.
- Exercise is important for both your mind and body. It is not always easy, but it is worth it. Talk with your health care team about how a physiotherapist or nurse can help.
- Keep a journal of your memories and experiences. Track your improvements and celebrate your achievements.

