

# Beyond the Intensive Care Unit

## Recovering from a Critical Illness



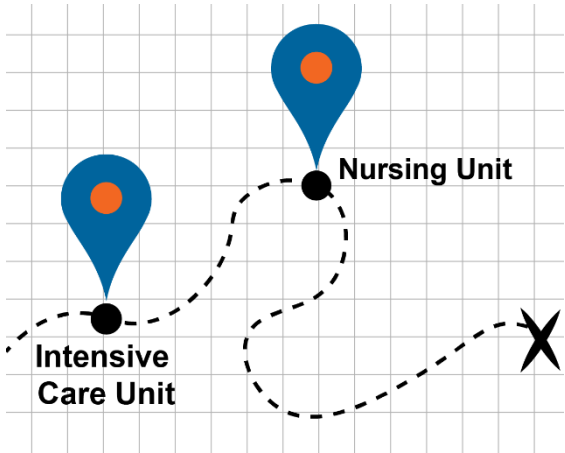
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Although the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) has been an essential part of your care, it is only one step along your road to recovery.

We (your doctor and the critical care team) have determined that you have improved enough that you no longer need the specialized care of the ICU.

The next step in your recovery journey is a move out of the ICU and onto one of our nursing units.



## **Your move to a nursing unit**

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Care on a nursing unit is different from the ICU. Some people worry about this change. The thought of having to meet new staff and adjust to a different setting with new routines can be stressful.

The team on the unit realizes this can be an upsetting time. They are used to caring for people who are recovering from critical illness. To help you settle in, they will give you information about the daily routines such as doctors' rounds, meal times, and visiting.

You will notice a difference between the number of nurses and the amount of equipment on the unit compared to the ICU. In the ICU, there was a lot of equipment around your bedside. On the nursing unit, you usually see much less equipment at the bedside.

In the ICU, nurses were at your bedside continuously monitoring you. On the nursing unit, nurses care for several people at the same time. They are not always at your bedside but they are always nearby. If you need help or want to speak to your nurse at any time, use your bedside call bell.

As part of the move to the nursing unit, your critical care team gives your new care team a detailed report about your condition and care. We do this to make sure your care continues seamlessly.

We invite you and your family to take time with your new care team to tell them more about yourself and what is important to you.

## Your recovery from critical illness

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Recovery from a critical illness takes time. It depends on many things including the length and severity of your illness, and whether your illness means changes to your lifestyle. Many people make a full recovery. Some people might need medication and further treatment.

We describe here some of the common problems that a person can experience and some ways to help.

### Amnesia

Your memory of the time in the ICU might be hazy or absent. This can be from the illness or medications we gave you. Some people never recall exactly what happened in the ICU.

We suggest you write down information and refer to it until your memory returns to normal.

### Voice and breathing

You might find that your voice sounds husky. This change is probably due to having a breathing tube and usually goes away with time.

Your breathing might have changed or might not be as strong as before. You might notice wheezing, congestion, or degrees of shortness of breath. Your nurse will check your breathing patterns and rate regularly. Your doctor might order medication to help open up your lung passages and make breathing easier.

Respiratory therapists and physiotherapists work with you on ways to strengthen your breathing.

We encourage you to do your deep breathing and coughing exercises once every hour while you are awake.

## **Mood and memory**

A critical illness is stressful to both the body and the mind. It is common to have some memory problems and fluctuating moods, feeling down one day and up the next. You might feel sad, angry, or a mix of many emotions. You might have trouble sleeping, difficulty concentrating, and lack of interest or energy. These are normal reactions to illness and should lessen with time. It is part of the healing process to have these feelings once in a while, but if they persist, tell your doctor or nurse so they can help.

Sometimes, it can feel like your recovery is taking a very long time. Try to stay positive and realistic about what you can do. Ask us what you can reasonably expect to be able to do. Remember, if there is anything you are unsure about, we are here to help you.

We suggest you keep a diary or journal of your progress. This can help you focus on your goals and see what you have accomplished.

## **Pain**

It is common to have some pain for several reasons. You might have existing or chronic conditions that cause pain. Or, you might have pain from recent surgery, injury, or critical illness.

It is very important that you tell the nurse or doctor about any type of discomfort or pain so they can assess and treat it promptly. Medications alone or in combination with other therapies can control most pain. Managing your pain well helps you feel better and recover faster.

## **Sleep**

It is common for people to experience changes in their sleeping patterns after a critical illness.

You might have trouble getting to sleep or you might wake up often during the night. Some people experience nightmares or 'flashbacks'. These can be frightening, and you should tell your nurse or doctor.

If you are having any problems sleeping, let the nurse or doctor know so they can help.

## **Tiredness and exercise**

You might find yourself feeling weak and tired. Even though you had physiotherapy and range of motion exercises in the ICU, you still need time to build up your full strength again.

Your arms and legs might feel heavy and be swollen with fluid, making moving around more of an effort. Your joints might feel stiff and painful.

To help with this, a physiotherapist continues to work with you to help you regain muscle strength and mobility. If pain is stopping you from moving around, tell your nurse.

## **Body image**

As a result of being ill, you could find that your appearance has changed. Your body might look swollen or you might have lost weight. You might notice changes in your hair or in the texture of your skin. These changes are almost always temporary.

Some people comment about scars and marks left on their skin. These are the result of procedures needed to care for you. Most of these marks will fade and some will disappear over time.

## Nutrition

While you are recovering from a critical illness, your body might need extra nutrition to help your recovery and rebuild your strength and energy.

The dietitian can help you get the nutrition you need for your recovery from critical illness.

You might have a decreased appetite, feel sick to your stomach (nausea), or have difficulty swallowing. Some people notice changes in your sense of taste such as foods tasting saltier, sweeter, or taking on an unusual metallic taste. These usually get better with time.

You might find it easier to eat small amounts more often rather than eating a large amount of food at a meal. It can be helpful to drink nutritional supplements such as Boost® or Ensure® to help you get the nutrition you need. You can also ask your care team if it is okay for you to have food from home for a change from the hospital food.

If you are unable to swallow foods safely, or if you are unable to eat enough food, you might need a feeding tube. The tube helps you get the nutrition that you need to support your recovery.

## You and your essential care partners

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Critical illness is a traumatic event for everyone involved. It is normal to feel stressed, anxious, and tired. It can help to talk with someone about what is happening and share your concerns.

Our social worker or a spiritual health practitioner can support you through this. Let your nurse know if you would like to talk with someone.

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This information does not replace the advice given to you by your healthcare provider.  
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