

# Critical Care

*What You Need To Know About  
Your Loved One's Care  
in the Intensive Care Unit*



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## **Intensive Care Unit (ICU)**

Intensive Care Unit (ICU) is an area that cares for people who are very sick, badly hurt or had a big surgery. All people in the ICU need special care or treatments not done in other areas of the hospital.

The care provided in the ICU is also called critical care. Doctors, nurses and members of the ICU care team have special training in critical care. (See pages 5 and 6 for the roles of the ICU care team.)

Your loved one's health can change quickly and often. The main goal of ICU care is to stop or slow changes and find out why your loved one is sick.

The ICU care team works to closely watch your loved one, give treatment and keep your loved one from getting worse while giving them the best chance to get better.

How long your loved one stays in the ICU depends on the illness or injury. Treatments called "life support" may be needed to help your loved one breathe, keep blood pressure in a safe range and help them heal. Members of the ICU care team will talk with you about the equipment being used.

Your loved one may not get better despite all of the ICU care team's efforts and treatments. In this case, members of the ICU care team will make a care plan that may include changing the care goal to focus more on comfort. They will talk with you about the change in care (short-term, long-term or both).

## What you can expect

Members of the ICU care team will do tests, give medicines and start treatments as needed. When they can, they will meet with you and tell you what is being done, explain machines, talk about what a day in ICU is like, and show you the care board. The care board is the white board on the wall that shows the date, room, care team and more.

My Care Board						
Day	Preferred name					Room #
Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
Date	Family/spokesperson information				Room phone #	
Nurse	Doctor			Consulting doctors		
My care team	My care needs/goals			Pain goal		
				Pain plan		
				Anticipated discharge date		

**The care board helps keep you informed about your loved one's care.**

## ICU goals

Your loved one will have goals while in the ICU. Members of the ICU care team will talk about the goals during rounds. This is when they meet to talk about what happened in the past 24 hours, how your loved one is doing, and the plan for the next 24 hours.

You may be part of the rounds if your loved one says it's OK or if you make health care decisions for your loved one.

## Breathing

If your loved one needs help breathing, they may be connected to a ventilator (breathing machine). It supplies extra oxygen to the lungs through a special breathing tube.

The goal is to help your loved one breathe on their own. Members of the health care team will remove the ventilator as soon as it is safe to do so.



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**Some of the equipment in the ICU. Members of your loved one's ICU care team will explain what the machines are and what they do.**

## **Delirium**

People who are very sick are also at risk of becoming confused and acting differently. Confusion that starts quickly over hours or days is known as delirium. Symptoms can come and go away quickly, many times in one day.

Members of the health care team will work to lower the chance of delirium by:

- using the smallest amount of medicines possible
- trying to help your loved one sleep at night and be up during the day
- helping your loved one to move, turn, sit, stand and walk (when able).

## Care for You

Having a loved one in the ICU can be difficult. You need to take care of yourself to reduce stress and make sure you have enough energy to help care for your loved one.

- Get enough rest and sleep.
- Eat regular meals with healthful foods.
- Go for walks.
- Tell a member of the ICU care team if you are feeling stressed.

Although members of your ICU care team talk about the plan of care, you may not understand or remember the details. Writing in a journal can help reduce fear and stress, and help better understand your loved one's stay.



**There are a number of healthy ways to cope with stress. Talk with a member of the ICU care team if you are feeling overwhelmed.**

## Members of the Health Care Team

Below are some of the members of your loved one's ICU care team.

- **Registered nurses:** Nurses help coordinate care, answer questions, give medicines and treatments, and watch for changes in your loved one's health.
- **Doctors:** Doctors select the best treatments for your loved one. They focus in different areas such as surgery, breathing, cancer, or the heart. Critical care physicians (also called intensivists) specialize in the care of people who are critically ill.

There may be several doctors on your loved one's care team. A doctor will update you on the progress and plan for your loved one. You can also request a care conference.

- **Advanced practice providers:** Nurse practitioners, physician assistants and clinical nurse specialists work with the doctors to care for your loved one.

They do many things including diagnosing health problems, prescribing medicines and doing procedures. They will give updates, answer questions and talk about your loved one's care goals.

- **Respiratory care practitioner and respiratory therapist:** Your loved one may be on a breathing machine (mechanical ventilator) to support their lungs. The respiratory therapist changes the breathing machine settings and helps with breathing treatments and exercises.

- **Pharmacist:** A pharmacist helps with the medicines your loved one receives in the hospital. They will get a list of medicines your loved one was on before being in the hospital and work to make sure the medicines your loved one receives in the ICU are the safest and most useful.
- **Social worker:** A social worker supports people who have challenges that result from a stay in the ICU. These include emotional stress, adapting to new roles and planning for the future. They can help with financial, insurance and legal issues.











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gen-ah-28999 (9/19)