

Critical Care

Critical Care follow-up service

Information on your recovery from critical illness

Introduction

Being critically ill can affect you in many ways that you will not be expecting, and your recovery may take a long time. However, the aim of the follow-up service is to support your recovery, and help in any way we can. This leaflet aims to give you advice and information on your recovery, describe some of the common problems that may occur, and suggest simple ways to try to resolve them.

At home

You may find that your family are very over-protective of you once you are at home, and worry more about your health. This is because they want to show you that they care, and ensure you don't become ill again. They have probably been through a very stressful period of time whilst you were ill too. Although this is a natural response, it is important for your physical recovery that you regain your independence. It is difficult for your relatives to understand how you feel, because your Critical Care admission seems a long way off now, and they may feel as frustrated as you that progress is sometimes slow. Talking to them about what has happened will help you all.

Eating normally again

Your appetite may be smaller, or your sense of taste may have changed. It is common for food to taste saltier or sweeter than normal, or to have a metallic taste. These changes are temporary and should return to normal within a few weeks.

If your appetite is small, try eating smaller regular meals with nourishing snacks in between, and take your time over eating. A healthy high-protein diet is very important to aid your recovering body, and to regain your strength and stamina.



Sleeping

You may find that your sleep pattern has changed since your illness. You may find it harder to fall asleep, or you may wake frequently during the night. As your recovery progresses and you become more active, you should find your sleep pattern returns to normal. You may have experienced nightmares and vivid dreams while in Critical Care or on the ward. These are often a side-effect of the sedative drugs you required whilst you were very ill, and can be very frightening, but usually subside over a few days or weeks. It may be helpful to talk about these at the follow-up clinic.

If you are having trouble sleeping, try a milky bed-time drink, avoiding alcohol, tea and coffee before bedtime. Try reading or listening to the radio before you go to sleep.

Sleeping tablets may help for a short while, but these should not be relied on for very long. Your GP can advise further about this if necessary.

Changes in your mood

You may find you suffer with fluctuating moods, one day up, the next day down, and you may feel very tearful too. You may also feel irritable for no reason. Again, this is a normal reaction to severe illness and will subside in time. If you have been ill for a long time, you may feel depressed for a while. Sometimes it may seem that you will never get back to normal and that any progress you make is unbearably slow. However, if you look at the progress you are making over a few days, you should be able to identify at least one thing that makes you feel stronger or more confident about now.

Set yourself realistic and achievable targets to help in your recovery. Keeping a diary of your recovery helps you to identify the progress you are making.

Stress

Recovery from critical illness can be very stressful; the degree of stress and how long it lasts varies. You may suffer symptoms such as disturbed sleep, lack of physical energy, a loss of appetite, moods or depression and problems with family relationships too. Recovery from a very stressful event takes time. If, at the end of each week you can look back and say that overall things were better than the previous week,

then you are making good progress. However, if you feel you are making little or no progress, you may wish to discuss this at the follow-up clinic, or with your GP.

Some of our patients and their relatives too, can experience severe and persistent symptoms of stress, specifically related to their critical illness. This does get better, and counselling can be of great value. This can be discussed at the follow-up clinic, or with your GP.

Exercise and mobility

You will probably have lost some weight and a lot of muscle strength, you will feel very weak, and your joints may be stiff for some time. It is most important that you follow the exercises that the physiotherapists have given you, to help you recover your strength. As your strength returns you may want to take on more vigorous exercise, such as swimming, brisk walking or cycling, to strengthen your limbs. Remember to take things gently at first, and gradually increase your level of activity as you feel stronger.

The Trust now offers an exercise class that is specifically aimed at those who have been in critical care. The aim of the class is to help you return to your previous level of fitness and improve your muscle strength. If you are interested in attending please speak to the follow-up nurse in clinic.

Changes in appearance

You may suffer hair loss or a change in the quality of your hair and skin, your finger nails may develop ridges in them and you may have lost weight too. These are common problems after a critical illness, and in time all of these changes will resolve.

You may have some scars, from where you had invasive drips, tubes or a tracheostomy. Again, in time these will fade and disappear, and your skin will return to normal. You may find that your voice sounds different too, because of the tube you had in your throat, or the tracheostomy you may have had. Once again, this will return to normal, but if it concerns you, please speak to the follow-up nurse in clinic.

Smoking

If you smoked before your illness, now is an ideal time to give up. If you stopped smoking while you were in hospital, keep going now you are at home. For patients who have been seriously ill, and have been on a ventilator, smoking can even further damage and weaken their lungs, and they may find that they are more susceptible to picking up chest infections.

The NHS Smoking Helpline can give you support and advice:
0300 123 1044

UHCW Stop Smoking Service: 024 7696 4760.

Critical Care Follow-up Clinic

This is a nurse-led clinic, and is held regularly in the Out-patients Department at the University Hospital. The aim of the clinic is to support the recovery and review the progress of patients who have been critically ill. It will also give you the opportunity to discuss any problems that you may have. We will be able to give you advice, or if necessary, refer you for further specialist advice.

24 hour voicemail

Should you wish to contact the follow-up service, please leave a message on our voicemail, and your call will be returned as soon as possible.

Telephone: 024 7696 6874

Other Sources of Help

ICUsteps - is a national charity set up by former critical care patients and their family members in partnership with healthcare professionals. They aim to promote better support and rehabilitation for patients and their relatives after a critical illness. More information is available on their website www.icusteps.org.

Coventry Critical Care Patient and Relative Support Group (ICUsteps Coventry) – if you need help coming to terms with the experience of critical illness, or just want to talk to somebody else who's been there too, this informal group can provide you with support, understanding and advice throughout your recovery period. More information is available on their website www.icusteps.org/support/coventry or by calling 024 7696 6568

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact 024 7696 6874 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy

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