



## **Contents**

- 2 - Introduction
- 3 - Information for relatives, friends and visitors
- 7 - Your time in the intensive care unit (ICU)
- 9 - How a critical illness can affect your body
- 11 - Returning home – what will life be like now?
- 13 - How might I feel after being in the intensive care unit?
- 15 - Eating well to get better
- 16 - Useful contacts

## **Introduction**

This booklet contains advice and information about intensive care. It tells you how critical illness may be treated and what recovery may be like. Most of this booklet is written for patients but there is a section specifically for relatives and visitors. By reading this booklet, relatives will learn what a patient's recovery may involve and it will give them the answers to some of the questions they may have.

Recovery is often a long and slow process. To begin with, patients may not feel up to reading this information, so a relative could keep hold of this booklet and pass it on at the right time.

Although there is a lot of information in this booklet, it can't tell you everything about critical illnesses but it does try to tell you what may happen and where you can find out more. Each section covers a different stage of the process of treatment and recovery. You can read it all in one go, or you can just read each section when you need to.

This booklet is produced by ICUsteps, a charity that supports intensive care patients. It has been written by people who have either been treated in an intensive care unit or are close relatives of someone who has. It has also been reviewed by a wide variety of intensive care professionals, and their help has been very valuable.

One of the scariest things about having a critical illness is not knowing what's going to happen. This booklet can't answer all your questions, but it will answer many of them. It will also tell you where you can get more information.

If you have any comments about this booklet we'd like to hear from you. Visit our website, [icusteps.com](http://icusteps.com), where you can fill in the 'contact us' form, or e-mail your comments direct to [contact@icusteps.com](mailto:contact@icusteps.com).

## **Information for relatives, friends and visitors**

This section gives information that should reassure you and let you know where to turn to for help when you need it. A patient may be in intensive care because of an accident, an illness, or for treatment after having a major operation, and relatives and friends will be worried about them.

Seeing the patient there for the first time can be very distressing. They are likely to be connected to a number of machines and drips and will often look very different from how they normally look.

### **The early days**

Your relative or friend has been admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU) because their body cannot work normally. If they do not get special help, they may have serious long-term effects to their health or they may die.

Sometimes patients in an ICU may have to be moved to an ICU in a different hospital. This could be because the patient needs specialist care that is not available locally, beds are needed for new patients who are more seriously ill or because there aren't enough beds. This can be very upsetting for you and you may have to travel further to visit your friend or relative. However, patients are only moved to a different hospital when it is absolutely necessary.

When a patient is first admitted to an ICU, it is normal for you to feel helpless, and desperate to know everything you can about their chances of recovery. However, the patient will need time to let their body rest and get over the shock of becoming so ill. Sometimes they will be given strong pain-killing drugs or sedatives to help the healing process begin. If you have questions about what is being done, ask the staff in the ICU. They will answer your questions as well as they can, but they will not want to give you false hope. The staff will be happy to explain what they are doing and they will be able to update you as time goes on.

### **What can I do to help?**

Days may go by with no change in the patient's condition. There may be nothing for you to do but sit by their bedside and wait. Nurses will often talk through what they are doing even if the patient is unconscious. This is because, even though they are heavily sedated, the patient may be aware of being touched, but they are unlikely to remember things as clearly as they would when fully conscious.

The nurses may ask you to bring in some of the patient's personal belongings to help them recover, such as their favourite perfume or music.

Talking to your relative or friend may also help. Keeping up a one-sided conversation can be difficult, but talking about shared experiences of holidays and good times can make you feel better too. You could also try reading a newspaper, magazine or book to them.

Even if the patient is conscious, you may find it hard to communicate with them. If they can't speak, they may be able to write, or spell out words by pointing to some letters, numbers and common words you have written on a piece of paper.

Some relatives find it helpful to be more involved in caring for the patient when they're recovering. You may be able to help by doing things such as brushing their teeth or

massaging or moisturising their hands and feet. This will depend on how ill the patient is, and won't always be possible but if you want to help in this way, ask the staff.

You can help the intensive care staff by choosing a family member or friend to be the main contact. Staff can tell the main contact how the patient is doing and they can pass on the information to other family members. This will save time for staff and relatives.

Often, relatives find it helpful to keep a diary of what is happening. It can help you to look back and see small improvements the patient has made. A diary can also be very useful later on to help the person who is ill. They may have very confused memories of their time in the ICU or no memories of it at all. A diary can help them to understand what happened to them and fill in the gaps in their memory.

Patients who are critically ill may have difficulty fighting infections and, because of how ill they are to begin with, this can be very serious. The staff will do all they can to make sure the patient is protected. You can help too by washing your hands and using the anti-bacterial creams, gels or sprays you'll see around the unit before you go near or touch the patient. You should also ask other visitors to do the same.

### **Other things you can expect**

There may be times when staff ask you to leave the patient's bedside. This is because some of the necessary medical procedures are not pleasant and may upset you. It also gives the staff room to do their job.

If the patient is ventilated (on a breathing machine), the nurses have to regularly clear the chest of mucus and fluid. They do this by putting a thinner tube into the breathing tube to suck up the mucus. This is quite noisy and may cause the patient to cough or retch.

The fluids given to the patient to keep them hydrated may make them look bloated and swollen. This is normal and will improve as the patient gets better.

Some of the machines that the patient is connected to have alarms that may sound to let staff know that something needs doing, for example if a drip needs to be changed. Usually, there is nothing to worry about – the staff will closely watch the patient at all times.

Sometimes, the patient may behave out of character. This may be because of their illness or medication. They may be agitated, confused, scared or paranoid. Paranoia is a form of anxiety or fear that can make you believe people are plotting against you or trying to hurt you. They may also have hallucinations (see things that aren't really there) and nightmares that seem very real to them. Patients sometimes believe the staff are trying to hurt them. This can be extremely distressing for you and the patient but it will improve as they get better and begin to recover.

If the patient in the ICU has been given sedatives, the sedatives will be gradually reduced as the patient gets better. This process is called weaning. Depending on how ill they were, the drugs they needed and how long they were sedated for, the weaning process can take hours or it can take days. During the weaning process, the patient will be drowsy and confused, particularly in the early stages, but it's a necessary step and it means they're getting better.

### **Looking after yourself**

You can help the patient by taking care of yourself. You shouldn't feel guilty for not being by their bedside 24 hours a day. You need to give yourself a break and this will also give the

patient time to rest. The patient will be very well cared for and the staff will contact you straight away if they need to or if there is any change in their condition.

Your family and friends will be concerned about you and the patient, and they will want to know how things are. You may appreciate their concern, but it can be tiring if the phone is ringing all the time when you're at home between visits to the hospital. Passing on the information by e-mail or text message to several people at once can be easier. Or, you could speak to one person regularly and they could pass the information on to others.

You may not feel like eating and you may have difficulty sleeping, but do take time to eat regularly and rest when you can. If you become tired and ill, you won't be able to care very well for the patient.

Many ICUs will give you an information sheet about contacting the unit by phone, hospital parking, meals for relatives and visitors and overnight accommodation if it's needed. If you're not given this information, ask a member of staff.

Visiting hours for ICUs are usually more flexible than for normal hospital wards, and staff will be able to give you details.

### **If the patient is your partner**

If the patient is your partner, you may suddenly feel very alone. Accept offers of help from friends and family. You will have less time to do things like shopping and may need help with childcare.

Often, in times of worry and stress, people turn to their partner for support. If you don't feel like you can tell other family members about your worries of what may happen in case you upset them, you could get help from one of the organisations listed in the 'Useful contacts' section at the end of this booklet.

Make sure that your bills are being paid and if you need to get access to your partner's bank account, contact your bank and explain the situation. You may be able to get temporary control of the account while your partner is not able to deal with these things.

If money becomes a problem, contact Citizens Advice for information on any financial help and benefits that are available to you.

### **When the patient comes out of the ICU**

You may have a reaction to the stress that you have been under once the patient is out of danger. If you feel guilty, worried or depressed, you can get help and information from the organisations listed at the end of this booklet. Or, see your GP (family doctor) if you need more support. They may be able to arrange counselling, so that you can talk to someone about what has happened.

### **Helping children who have a relative in an ICU**

You may need to consider whether a child should visit their parent or a close relative in an ICU. You should check with staff before bringing children to the unit and talk to the child about it. If the child decides they want to go into the ICU, prepare them for what they might see, including the machines, what they do and how the patient might look. (See 'What can I do to help?' and 'Other things you can expect'.)

What you can tell the child will depend on their age and why their parent or relative was taken into the ICU. You can help a child deal with the situation by:

- trying to keep to their routine as much as possible (including school trips, seeing friends and going to after-school clubs if the child wants to);
- making sure the child is looked after by someone they know, so they can feel safe at a difficult time;
- telling the school, and any other relevant groups, that the child's parent or relative is in intensive care; and
- explaining the situation and being honest if you don't know what is going to happen – if you are not sure, try to say something they can understand that will help the child feel secure and reassured, for example, 'Daddy is very ill but the doctors are doing everything they can to help him'.

If the patient is a parent, try to make sure their child has special time with other members of the family (for example, reading bedtime stories together), as the child will probably start to depend on them more. The child may like to keep a diary with two pages each day – one for a brief description of each day and what they did and one for any souvenirs of the day (pictures and so on). This helps the child understand what is happening and makes it easier for them to talk to the parent about what happened in their life while the parent was in hospital.

Some children may begin to act younger than they are. For example, they may start to suck their thumb or carry a favourite toy with them. This shouldn't be discouraged because the child is trying to find comfort at a worrying time. If you are concerned about them or their behaviour changes significantly, ask your GP whether the child could receive counselling or support.

Once the patient is out of the ICU, the child may need help dealing with what happened. This can be a gradual process and can take several months. At times, it may be helpful to mention the patient's stay in hospital so the child knows they can talk about it. Let them ask questions, and ask them how they felt at that time. If the child is very young, they may find it easier to show their feelings by drawing pictures or acting out what happened.

Remember that children can ask very blunt questions, so if the patient doesn't feel strong enough to cope with this, ask another family member or friend to talk to the child about their experiences and feelings.

If the patient dies, the child will need special attention. Bereavement counselling services can provide special help for a young person whose relative has died. (See the 'Useful contacts' section for details of organisations that provide bereavement counselling.)

## **Your time in the intensive care unit (ICU)**

When you've been critically ill and you have been asleep for long periods because you were unconscious or sedated, you may have difficulty remembering what happened to you. Also, you may have had vivid dreams, nightmares or hallucinations which upset you. You may even believe that staff were trying to hurt you, because of the treatments you were given to make you better. These things are normal for someone who has been critically ill and can be caused by the illness or the drugs used to treat it. You may find it difficult, but it can help to talk to someone you trust about this and it really is nothing to be ashamed or embarrassed about.

Below is some information about some of the things that happen in an intensive care unit. It may help you make sense of things you remember.

### **Staff in the intensive care unit (ICU)**

There are many different people who work and help out in the ICU. Doctors in the ICU are usually also anaesthetists, so they are specially trained to give you pain relief and advice. As well as the nurses, you may also see speech therapists, physiotherapists, dieticians (specialists in food and nutrition) and other support staff on the unit.

You are likely to meet a lot of these people, but you may only remember a few names and faces.

#### **▪ Doctors**

In an ICU there will usually be a consultant who leads a team of doctors. The consultant and their team usually go around the unit each day to check on each patient and make decisions about their treatment and care. There may be other staff with them, and you may remember them examining you or hearing them discussing your treatment. The doctors and their team may spend time with you each day to see how you are getting on. They may examine you, listen to your lungs with a stethoscope and look at any wounds you may have, in order to plan your treatment and care. Doctors who are specialists in other areas may also visit you. They may be medical, surgical or orthopaedic doctors, who you saw before you were admitted to the unit. They will look after you again once you are well enough to be looked after on a general ward.

#### **▪ Nurses**

In an ICU, one nurse will usually look after one, or at most, two patients. Your nurse will be responsible for providing most of the care you need and, in the early stages, will spend most of their time at your bedside. They will also work with other professionals, such as doctors or physiotherapists, to make sure you receive the correct treatment and care when you need it.

The nurses will do things for you that you can't do yourself, including the following.

- Taking regular blood tests
- Changing your treatment in line with your test results
- Giving you the drugs and fluids that the doctors have prescribed
- Recording your blood pressure, heart rate and oxygen levels
- Clearing fluid and mucus from your chest using a suction tube
- Turning you in your bed every few hours to prevent you getting sores on your skin
- Cleaning your teeth and moistening your mouth with a wet sponge
- Washing you in bed

- Changing your sheets
- Changing your surgical stockings, which help your circulation when you are inactive (lying still) for a long time
- Putting drops in your eyes to make it easier for you to blink

#### ▪ **Physiotherapists**

During your stay in intensive care, you will be seen and treated by a physiotherapist. They will try to make sure your lungs are kept clear by carrying out physiotherapy on your chest. They will also exercise your arms and legs when you are asleep to work your muscles and to stop your joints becoming stiff. If you were ventilated (connected to a machine to help you breathe) in the ICU, the physiotherapist will give you exercises to help strengthen your lungs and breathing muscles so you can breathe without the machine as you get better. This will reduce the chances of you getting a lung infection.

As you get better, physiotherapists also help you with exercises to get you strong enough to get out of bed. When you're ready, they will help you get up and moving about again.

#### ▪ **Dieticians**

A dietician will visit you to work out your nutritional needs and how you will be fed. You may be fed through a nasogastric tube (a tube that goes up your nose and down into your stomach) or, if you cannot have food in your stomach, you may be fed through a drip straight into your vein.

#### ▪ **Speech therapists**

A speech therapist may also visit you, especially if you have a tracheostomy. (A tracheostomy is a procedure to make a hole in your throat and insert a tube, which is connected to a ventilator or 'breathing machine'.)

The speech therapist may see later if you can have a speaking valve on the tracheostomy. They will also monitor you to see if you can swallow well enough to start to drink and eat normally.

### **Moving to a general ward**

As you begin to get better, you will not need the machines that were keeping you alive and monitoring your condition. The physiotherapist will probably give you exercises to help strengthen your muscles to get you moving around again. You will be very weak and get tired easily at first. As you become able to do more for yourself, you may be moved to a different section of the ICU or transferred to another ward in the hospital with a reduced level of nursing.

This can be a difficult time for patients and relatives because there is no longer the one-to-one nursing that there was in the early stages, but you are still far from being well.

The visiting times in a general ward may not be as flexible as they are in the ICU and you may be disturbed more by other patients and visitors around you. Rest when you can. You may find that a personal music player with headphones helps you to relax and pass the time.

Before leaving hospital, your physiotherapist may give you an exercise plan to help with your recovery. If not, you (or a friend or relative) can ask them for a plan.

## **How a critical illness can affect your body**

You may lose a lot of weight. This is common, as being ill and inactive will cause your muscles to shrink. You will put weight on again as you begin to get better and exercise.

Don't be surprised if you feel very tired and weak at first. You will get stronger, but it may take up to 18 months for you to feel fully better. Set yourself realistic goals. Keeping a diary that you can read at times when you don't feel so well can make you realise how much progress you are making.

You may have other problems that are related to your injury or illness, such as vivid dreams or nightmares. Your doctor will be able to give you advice about these.

Even if you don't make a full recovery, you can still achieve a lot and lead a full life. There are people who have been critically ill for months, and a year later, you'd never know what they'd been through. Try to stay positive even if it means making some changes to the way you live.

### **Breathing**

If you had a tracheostomy you are likely to have a scar on your neck where the tube was inserted. The scar will gradually fade and become less obvious. The tracheostomy makes it easier for you to breathe and to reduce your body's need for the ventilator.

Keep doing the breathing exercises the physiotherapist gave you to strengthen the muscles and reduce the risk of chest infection.

### **Your voice**

If you've had help with your breathing, your voice may have changed. At first your throat may be sore so don't strain your voice. Try to relax as much as you can when you speak, and drink plenty of water. You may have marks at the corners of your mouth caused by the tape used to keep your breathing tube in place. You may also have a dry mouth caused by a lack of saliva.

### **Your skin and hair**

Your skin may be dry or itchy after your illness. Moisturising it regularly can help stop this.

You may notice changes to your hair and some of it may fall out. This is not unusual and can even happen months after you leave hospital. It usually grows back but it may be more curly, straight or thin, or a different colour from how it was before.

### **Bruising**

If you were on a drip or had other tubes in you, you may have bruises and scars. These are usually on your hands, arms, wrists, neck, groin or sides of your chest. You may also have bruises on your stomach because of injections to stop your blood clotting.

## **Changes to your hearing, taste, touch and sense of smell**

Your senses may be affected by your stay in the ICU, but the effects don't usually last for very long. Your hearing, sight, taste, touch and sense of smell may have changed, which can be upsetting.

Some of the drugs you may have to take can affect your hearing. Other types of drugs can leave a metallic taste in your mouth.

You may have been fed through a tube into your stomach, or by a drip into your veins. When you begin to eat and drink normally again, food may taste stronger or just different. Your sense of smell may also be affected because it is closely linked to your sense of taste.

You may have sore, dry eyes because you were sedated for a long time, or your eyes may be puffy and swollen because of the fluids you were given to keep you hydrated.

Things that touch your skin may feel odd and you may experience tingling in parts of your body. This can be caused by some of the drugs you were given or by your body's reaction to your illness.

These changes are usually temporary and should disappear over time.

## **Problems going to the toilet**

When you were in the ICU, a doctor may have put a tube in your bladder. This is called a urinary catheter. It drains urine from your bladder and allows the staff to check your fluid levels. When the tube is taken out, your muscles may be weaker so you may find it difficult to control your bladder. Don't worry, this usually returns to normal.

If you have problems urinating, you may have an infection, so see your doctor or a nurse as soon as possible. Symptoms include:

- not being able to pass urine for several hours;
- having a burning pain while urinating; and
- blood in your urine.

Sometimes medication can change the amount and colour of your urine. It may even affect how often you go to the toilet. The medication may also affect your bowel movements.

If you're worried about any of these things, talk to your doctor about them.

## **Smoking**

If you smoked before your illness, now is an ideal time to give up. If you stopped smoking while you were in hospital, don't start again when you are at home. If you have been critically ill and on a ventilator, smoking can damage and weaken your lungs even further. The NHS Smoking Helpline can give you support and advice. Phone 0800 022 4332.

## **Returning home – what will life be like now?**

Leaving hospital and returning home is a major step in your recovery and is likely to have been a goal you've been working towards for some time. It is a very positive step but it will take time and effort to get back to a normal life. You won't have the same support you had in hospital and it can be a difficult time for you and for your relatives. It's normal to go through times where you feel depressed or frustrated because you don't seem to be getting better. Setting small goals in your daily routine can help you recover and show you that you are improving. A small goal could be something as simple as making a drink for yourself, or walking a few steps further without needing to rest. Don't push yourself too hard as this can end up making your recovery take longer.

When you've been critically ill, you'll probably feel very tired and won't have much energy. It will take time before you feel well enough to cope with everyday life and many more months to get back to full strength.

Set yourself targets to help you get back to normal, and keep doing the exercises your physiotherapist gave you. Don't overdo your exercise as this can set your recovery back.

You will need to slowly increase your activity to build up your strength, but make sure that you rest when you need to. In the early days you may need to take things very slowly.

If you've had an operation, you must follow your surgeon's advice. Your body will tell you if it's getting tired or is in pain. If you feel unwell or get out of breath, stop what you're doing and rest.

### **Social life and hobbies**

When you've been seriously ill, you may feel differently about things and you may not want to do things you used to enjoy. For example, you may not feel like seeing lots of people at once, so start by seeing one or two friends at a time for short periods.

You may find it difficult to concentrate and may even find it hard to follow a TV programme. Your concentration will get better. During your recovery you may be forgetful, but your memory will usually improve as you get better.

Your recovery may take a long time and, as you get better and begin to do more, you may find that things get on top of you. During this time you may lack confidence, worry about your recovery, or even feel depressed. Talking about this to your family or a close friend can help.

### **Relationships and family**

After you've been critically ill, you and the people around you may seem to change. Your family may make a fuss and might not understand why you're not keen on the hobbies and interests you used to enjoy.

Your family and friends were afraid you might die, so they may want to do everything for you when you get home. If this annoys you, talk to them calmly about how you feel. Don't bottle things up and get angry.

You may not remember your time in hospital clearly, and this can be confusing and frightening. It may help to talk to your family about what they remember about your stay in hospital, how they felt when you were ill and the things that happened while you were there. If your relative kept a diary while you were in the ICU, it can be helpful to look at this with them.

## **Getting back to your daily routine**

Lots of people worry about coming home from hospital or returning to work after a critical illness. It's normal to wonder whether you'll be able to cope.

Talk about it with your family and think about how you can adapt things at home to help you.

If you used to work, you may not be well enough to return full-time straight away. When you're feeling better, it's a good idea to arrange to go back and see your colleagues and talk to your boss. Depending on your job, you may be able to do a few hours a day at first.

If you have young children you may feel under even greater pressure to get back to normal. Do the important things first – other jobs can wait. Take a nap at the same time as the children and don't be afraid to ask your friends and family for help.

## **Sexual relationships following critical illness**

It's normal to be worried about when it's safe to start having sex again. Your partner is likely to be worried about this too.

You may be concerned about the following.

- Will my scars be healed enough?
- If I have to use a medical device, such as a colostomy bag, catheter or pacemaker, will it get in the way?
- Will I hurt or ache too much?
- Will I have the strength?
- What if my partner doesn't want to have sex?
- What if I can't continue or can't reach an orgasm?

You may worry because you don't know what will happen. If you're worried about your strength, compare the energy needed for sex with the energy you need for your exercises. If you're coping well with your exercises, you may be able to cope with sex.

Most people find it difficult to talk about sex, but try to relax and keep a sense of humour. Cuddles are really important. Take things slowly and see what happens.

Sometimes, medical problems such as impotence (being unable to get and keep an erection) can affect your sex life. If you're worried, talk to your GP.

## **How might I feel after being in the intensive care unit?**

After being critically ill, it may take up to 18 months for you to fully recover.

Being weak and having to put a lot of effort into doing simple things, such as getting dressed and moving about, can make you feel low for a while. You can also feel like you've lost your independence if you need a lot of help from other people at this early stage.

Your mood may change often and you may experience some of the following.

- Feeling upset and tearful
- Always feeling tired
- Not being able to sleep properly
- Not caring what you look like
- Being quick-tempered and snappy
- Forgetting things
- Not feeling hungry
- Not understanding what has happened to you and how ill you have been
- Feeling scared that you almost died
- Worrying about getting ill again
- Worrying about how long it's taking to recover

Your family and friends will be pleased to have you home, but they may not understand why you may feel sad. Talk to them about how you feel. Also, go to see your GP who may be able to offer you treatment or counselling to help you through this difficult time.

As you get better and start doing more, you will face new challenges. They can make you feel scared – try to keep calm and take slow, deep breaths.

After you have left the ICU you may experience a number of psychological symptoms. They could include the following.

- Vivid dreams
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks (suddenly remembering, in vivid detail, a past experience)
- Hallucinations
- Anxiety
- A loss of confidence

Sometimes these symptoms can be triggered by a sound, smell or something you see. These usually disappear over time.

### **Sleep**

You need regular sleep to keep your body healthy. It can take time to get back into a normal sleep routine. You may find it harder to fall asleep, or you may often wake during the night. If you have trouble sleeping, try a milky bedtime drink but avoid tea and coffee as the caffeine in them can keep you awake. Reading or listening to the radio before you go to sleep may also help. Your GP can give you advice if you have trouble sleeping, but things should return to normal as you become stronger and more active.

## **Coming to terms with your experience**

People feel differently about their time in intensive care. For some the experience is no more worrying than any other stay in hospital. Some have no clear memory of it, or they may try to forget it. For others, being so ill can be a very traumatic experience and it may take time for them to come to terms with it afterwards.

The strong drugs and the treatment the ICU staff had to give you to keep you alive will have affected your body and mind. It is common for patients in an ICU to experience hallucinations, nightmares or dreams that can seem real and very frightening. At times, you may have felt slightly aware, but didn't know where you were or what was happening.

## **Things that may help you get over what happened**

After leaving hospital you may have questions about your stay in the ICU. Some hospitals offer a follow-up clinic. This usually involves being invited back to the ICU you were in to look around, see some of the staff who looked after you and find out more about what happened to you. The idea of going back to the unit can be frightening and it may be some time until you feel ready to do it. However, it can be very helpful to see where you were and find out more about what happened to you.

You won't remember everything that happened to you in the ICU. Writing down what you can remember may help you to collect together your memories. You could try to remember something about each day you were in hospital to help make sense of the time you lost. It may help to ask your family and friends what they remember about it.

If your relatives or visitors kept a diary while you were in the ICU, reading it can help you understand what happened. It may take a while before you feel ready to read it, and it can be very emotional, but many patients who have read their relative's diaries find it helps them understand what happened.

If it helps, take the time to understand the medical side of what happened to you. Staff at the follow-up clinic will be able to help with this or you can ask your GP about it.

## **Hallucinations and paranoia**

It's common for patients in an ICU to have hallucinations or nightmares. You may have had dreams or feelings of being tortured, trapped in bed or felt as if you were being held captive. This was probably caused by having drip lines and catheters inserted into your body to help keep you alive and monitor your condition. The fear this causes can remain for weeks after you have been transferred to a general ward or discharged from hospital. You may also have felt some paranoia as you tried to make sense of things when you were confused. This too normally passes with time. If going back to hospital for a follow-up appointment frightens you, take along someone you trust to reassure you.

In a few cases, patients (and their relatives) can have extreme symptoms of stress after their treatment in the ICU. This is known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and is rare. Most people who have suffered from PTSD found that talking to a professional counsellor about their stay in hospital helps. You can ask your GP to refer you for counselling.

## **Eating well to get better**

While you were in intensive care you will have received your food as a liquid. You may have been fed through a tube inserted into your nose and down into your stomach, or by a drip straight into your vein. Your body will have used its stored fat and muscle for energy to help fight your illness.

You may have difficulty eating because:

- you don't feel hungry;
- your mouth is too sore to eat;
- food tastes different; or
- it hurts to swallow.

Try starting off with small portions and eating more often throughout the day. Instead of having full meals, have small meals and two or three snacks each day. You can buy specially prepared milk drinks and desserts, like the ones you were given in hospital, which contain lots of vitamins and minerals.

Take your time when eating and relax afterwards to avoid indigestion.

If some foods taste very salty or sweet it is likely that your taste buds are taking time to get back to normal. This is common and will soon improve – don't add extra salt or sugar to your food.

If you enjoy drinking alcohol, check with your doctor that it is safe to drink it with the medication you are taking and that it will not have a bad effect on your condition. Even if it is safe, don't drink too much.

Sometimes, taking strong antibiotics and steroids can lead to infections, such as oral candida (thrush in your mouth), which can give you a thick white substance on the roof of your mouth and tongue, making it painful to swallow. If you think you might have thrush, your GP will be able to treat it easily.

During your recovery you must make sure you drink enough. Take care not to become dehydrated. Dehydration can:

- dry out your skin;
- make you produce less urine, which can have a bad effect on your kidneys; and
- make you feel very weak and tired.

Drink regularly throughout the day so you don't become dehydrated. You can have hot drinks as well as water and squash.

If you need more support or have symptoms that you're worried about, you should see your GP.

You should also talk to your GP if:

- you have trouble getting back to your normal weight;
- your bowel movements don't return to normal;
- there is blood in your urine; or
- you get severe indigestion.

Your GP may be able to offer you advice or refer you to a dietician.

## **Useful contacts**

### **Assist**

Help and support for people who suffer from severe trauma.

Phone: 01788 560800

Website: [www.assisttraumacare.org.uk](http://www.assisttraumacare.org.uk)

### **Asthma UK**

A charity dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of people in the UK whose lives are affected by asthma.

Helpline: 08457 01 02 03

Website: [www.asthma.org.uk](http://www.asthma.org.uk)

### **BBC Health**

A useful and helpful website covering many areas of health and illness.

Website: [www.bbc.co.uk/health](http://www.bbc.co.uk/health)

### **British Heart Foundation**

A charity that gives information and support on the health of your heart.

Helpline: 0845 0708070

Website: [www.bhf.org.uk](http://www.bhf.org.uk)

### **BRAKE**

A road-safety charity dedicated to stopping deaths and injuries on roads and caring for people whose relative or friend has been killed or injured on the road.

Phone: 01484 559909

Website: [www.brake.org.uk](http://www.brake.org.uk)

### **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy**

For details of counsellors and psychotherapists in your area.

Phone: 0870 443 5252

Website: [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

### **Citizens Advice**

You can find the phone number of your local branch by entering your postcode on their website or by looking them up in The Phone Book.

Website: [www.citizensadvice.org.uk](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk)

### **The Colostomy Association**

Providing support and information to anyone who has a colostomy.

Helpline: 0800 587 6744 or 0800 328 4257

Website: [www.colostomyassociation.org.uk](http://www.colostomyassociation.org.uk)

### **Cruse Bereavement Care**

Cruse Bereavement Care provides counselling, support, information, advice, education and training services to the friends and relatives of someone who has died, to help them understand their grief and cope with their loss.

Helpline: 0844 477 9400

Young person's helpline: 0808 808 1677

Website: [www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

### **Diabetes UK**

The largest charity in the UK for the care and treatment of people with diabetes.

Helpline: 0845 120 2960

Website: [www.diabetes.org.uk](http://www.diabetes.org.uk)

### **DIPEX**

A helpful website covering a wide variety of personal experiences of health and illness. It includes video interviews of people who have been through different illnesses and includes sections for intensive care patients and their relatives.

Website: [www.dipex.org/intensiveware](http://www.dipex.org/intensiveware) (for patients)

Website: [www.dipex.org/relativesofintensiveware](http://www.dipex.org/relativesofintensiveware) (for patients' relatives)

### **Headway**

A charity that supports people with brain injuries and the people who care for them.

Helpline: 0808 800 2244

Website: [www.headway.org.uk](http://www.headway.org.uk)

### **ICUsteps**

A charity set up by former intensive care patients and their family members. It aims to promote better support and rehabilitation after a critical illness. They hold regular, informal drop-in sessions in Milton Keynes. They also offer support to former patients and their family members who want to set up similar groups in other areas. The website includes information about the experiences of former patients and family members, a bulletin board and more contact details.

Phone: 0870 471 5238

Website: [www.icusteps.com](http://www.icusteps.com)

### **Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre (ICNARC)**

ICNARC is a charity that is dedicated to improving intensive care treatment and helping patients to get better sooner, with fewer complications. It has useful information for patients and relatives including an excellent list of contacts for people with specific illnesses.

Website: [www.icnarc.org/patients](http://www.icnarc.org/patients)

### **The Intensive Care Society**

The Intensive Care Society is a professional organisation for doctors working in intensive care. The website has a very useful 'patients and relatives' section that explains many areas of intensive care, such as staffing, equipment, treatment and recovery.

Website: [www.ics.ac.uk/patrel](http://www.ics.ac.uk/patrel)

### **Macmillan Cancer Support**

Macmillan Cancer Support improves the lives of people affected by cancer. They provide practical, medical, emotional and financial support and campaign for better cancer treatment.

Helpline: 0808 808 2020

Website: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

### **Meningitis Trust**

The Meningitis Trust provides support and information on identifying, and recovering from, meningitis.

Helpline: 0800 028 18 28

Website: [www.meningitis-trust.org](http://www.meningitis-trust.org)

### **NHS Direct**

An NHS service with a health encyclopaedia that allows you to get information on a range of medical conditions, symptoms, types of surgery, medicines, and health and lifestyle advice.

Phone: 0845 4647

Website: [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

### **NHS Smoking Helpline**

An NHS phone line and website with detailed information about the free NHS support services for people trying to stop smoking.

Helpline: 0800 022 4332

Website: [www.nhs.uk/gosmokefree](http://www.nhs.uk/gosmokefree)

**NICE** (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence)

The NICE website contains information on a broad range of medical issues.

Website: [www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)

**PatientUK**

This website allows people to download, or listen to, evidence-based information leaflets covering a wide range of medical and health topics.

Website: [www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)

**Princess Royal Trust for Carers**

The Princess Royal Trust for Carers is the largest provider of support services for carers in the UK.

Phone: 0844 800 4361

Website: [www.carers.org](http://www.carers.org)

**Samaritans**

Samaritans provides confidential, unbiased emotional support, 24 hours a day, for people who feel distressed, desperate or suicidal.

Helpline: 08457 90 90 90

Website: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

**Spinal Injuries Association**

A support charity for people suffering from spinal-cord injuries.

Helpline: 0800 980 0501

Website: [www.spinal.co.uk](http://www.spinal.co.uk)

**The Stroke Association**

An organisation that provides support and information on strokes and guidance on coping with life after a stroke.

Helpline: 0845 3033 100

Website: [www.stroke.org.uk](http://www.stroke.org.uk)

**Winston's Wish**

A charity for children whose parent, brother or sister has died. Winston's Wish helps them to rebuild their lives and face the future with hope.

Helpline: 08452 03 04 05

Website: [www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

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