

Treating people who are critically ill

Information for family and friends

You have been given this information sheet because someone close to you has been referred to the intensive care team. When someone becomes suddenly very unwell (critically ill), there are different options about the treatment they should receive. This leaflet tells you about these options. We hope that this information will help you to understand what is happening, and to help you when you speak to the doctors and nurses about the treatment.



Who are the intensive care team?

The intensive care team are doctors and nurses who look after patients on intensive care units. They are experts in deciding on the best treatments for critically ill patients.

What will the intensive care team do?

To decide what treatment is best for a patient, the first step is to find out about the patient and their illness. A doctor from the intensive care team will talk to the patient or people close to the patient if the patient is too ill to talk to the doctor.

The doctor will:

- ask about the patient and what has been happening to them;
- try to find out what is important to them about their care;
- read the medical notes and look at any test results; and
- examine the patient.

They will also talk to the team who have been looking after the patient on the ward. Together they will then decide on the best care for that particular person.

How do the intensive care team decide what treatment a patient needs?

Doctors look at many different things when deciding on the right treatment.

- They look at all the medical information about the illness.
- They look at how the patient was before becoming very ill, such as whether they were well or if they already have serious problems with their health.
- They gather information about what is important to the patient about their care. They do this by talking to the patient. If the patient is too ill, they will talk to someone close to the patient.

The doctor considers all this information and decides what will be the best treatment for this particular person.

Sometimes it is best that treatment and care are given on the ward that someone is already on. Sometimes the intensive care team will recommend that the person is cared for on the intensive care unit. The doctors will consider each option carefully, and will recommend the treatment that is best for each particular patient.

Sometimes, if a patient is nearing the end of their life the best care may be to concentrate on helping their symptoms rather than giving them treatment to prolong their life. This is sometimes called palliative care. If this type of care is being considered, the doctors and nurses will talk to you about it.

Treatment on the ward

Patients who do not need to be treated in an intensive care unit will be cared for on the ward by the ward doctors and nurses. Sometimes specialist critical-care outreach nurses will also look after the patient on the ward.

Treatment in an intensive care unit

An intensive care unit (sometimes called a critical-care unit or high-dependency unit) is a ward in the hospital where patients have specific medical treatments, such as help with their breathing using a machine or very close observation of drug treatment for their heart. If this type of treatment will help a patient they will be transferred to the intensive care unit.

Intensive care treatments can be harsh and distressing for patients. For some people, treatment in intensive care does not work and they may not survive. Some patients have long-term problems after intensive care treatment. This is why doctors need to think carefully about whether intensive care treatment is the best choice for each person.

Someone I am close to is critically ill. How can I help them?

You can play an important part in helping the team decide what is the best care for the patient. You know the patient well and can explain to the team looking after them what the patient was like before they became seriously ill. You can tell the team what things are important to the patient. If the patient has talked to you about how they would want to be treated if they became seriously ill, you can tell the doctor looking after them.

Please listen carefully to what the doctors and nurses tell you about the patient's condition, and tell them what you think the patient would say if they could answer the questions themselves.

What happens next?

The doctors will talk to the patient and to you about what treatment is right for the patient. Please ask questions if there is anything that you do not understand. The right treatment may be different if the patient's condition changes. The doctors will tell you and the patient about any changes.

I have a concern about the decisions that have been made. What should I do?

Occasionally people have different views on what is the best treatment. Usually these differences are sorted out in a discussion between the patient, their family and the team caring for them. If you have a concern, please ask to speak to a senior doctor or nurse. If you are still concerned, you can get advice from the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) team in the hospital. (You can contact them on ...).

Where can I find more help and advice?

Critical illness is a very difficult time for patients, as well as their families and friends, and you may need help and support. Our nursing staff and doctors are here to help you. If you have questions or need any more information please ask a member of staff.

The ward team can arrange for someone from the multi-faith team to come and talk with you and offer spiritual support. The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) team can also help with more general information and support.