Coping When a Loved One is in Intensive Care

The Intensive Care Unit is an area in the hospital where some patients go for medical care after major surgeries.

- The Intensive Care Unit has special equipment to monitor and support a patient’s body systems (heart, lungs, kidneys, etc.) when they are not working well.
- Nursing care in the unit is highly skilled and intense. Each nurse is assigned to care for a small number of patients. At times, a nurse may be assigned to care for one patient.
- The health care team has special training in the knowledge and skills needed to care for critically ill people. The health care team includes doctors, nurses, therapists, dietitians, social workers, pharmacists and technicians.

Intensive Care Unit Health Care Team

- **Doctors**
  The Ohio State University Medical Center is a teaching hospital. A team of doctors is assigned to care for each patient. The primary team is assigned according to the patient’s special needs at the time of admission. When the patient is admitted to the unit, they are also cared for by the health care team. These two teams work together to provide the best medical care possible for the patient.
  
  Each team is made up of several doctors with different titles and levels of training.
  
  ▶️ The doctor in charge of the patient’s care is called the **attending**
doctor or the attending physician. Many attending doctors in the ICU have special training in caring for the very ill or injured.

- **Interns and residents** are doctors who have an active part in patient care. They are doctors who are training to be specialists. Interns and residents are called **house officers** or house staff. The house officer can call the attending doctor at any time to discuss the care of the patient.

- The Intensive Care team includes **fellows**. A fellow is an experienced doctor who has completed intern and resident training and works in a specific area of medicine.

- **Medical students** are studying and training to be doctors.

- **Nurses**
  - Nurses plan and coordinate patient care. Intensive Care nurses at The Ohio State University Medical Center have special education and skills. They monitor patients closely and provide care. The nurses may work 4, 8, 12 or 16-hour shifts at a time.
  - A nurse manager oversees the daily activities of the unit.
  - A clinical nurse specialist (CNS) has extra education and experience. The CNS helps monitor care provided in the unit.

- **Nurse Practitioners (NPs)**
  - NPs are registered nurses who have completed advanced education and training.
  - The NP works with the doctor and has an active part in patient care and in ordering procedures and treatments.

- **Patient Care Resource Managers (PCRM) / Case Managers / Social Workers**
  - Help with concerns about insurance and money.
  - Help obtain housing if needed.
  - Coordinate home care and discharge planning.
  - Give supportive counseling.
• **Chaplains**
  ▶ Call your pastor or minister.
  ▶ Talk and listen.
  ▶ Prayer.

• **Respiratory Therapists**
  ▶ Provide treatments to help the patient breathe easier.
  ▶ Assure breathing equipment is working properly.

• **Occupational / Physical Therapists**
  ▶ Help with body positioning and activity.
  ▶ Help with range of motion to arms, hands, legs and feet.

• **Dietitians**
  ▶ Monitor dietary needs and make suggestions to the health care team.

• **Pharmacists**
  ▶ Dispense and monitor patient medicines.
  ▶ Provide information about medicines.

• **Patient Care Associates (PCAs)**
  ▶ Help with personal hygiene, turning and bathing patients.
  ▶ Help the nurse with taking the patient to a test or procedure.
  ▶ Collect temperatures, blood pressures and other vital signs.

• **Unit Clerical Coordinator (UCC)**
  ▶ The Unit Clerical Coordinator (UCC) is the unit secretary. The UCC will answer the phone and may answer the patient’s call light. They also do a variety of clerical tasks to help the health care team with patient care.
• **Family Support Coordinator**
  ▶ Facilitates communication between the family and staff.
  ▶ Provides physical and emotional support.
  ▶ Provides information concerning hospital resources.

• **Volunteers**
  ▶ During the day, a volunteer may be present to offer a helping hand. Volunteers do not have a formal medical background. They are trained by the Department of Volunteer Services.
  ▶ They can:
    ■ Give directions to places in the hospital.
    ■ Help with parking, transportation or lodging problems.
    ■ Get you help from social workers, chaplains or any member of the health care team.
    ■ Answer questions about visiting times or unit rules.
    ■ Check with nurses for information about patients.
    ■ Arrange for a nurse to speak with you.
  ▶ Please ask the volunteer for help. They are interested in helping you. They are more than willing to listen and offer a strong shoulder to lean on.

**Visiting a Patient in the Intensive Care Unit**

• Your family member or friend will need much care and attention from the health care staff. Please follow the posted visiting times. You need to get permission from the nurse to visit a patient before entering the unit. The Intensive Care has volunteers to help with visiting. If a volunteer is not on duty, use the phone system or intercom. It is located in or near the waiting area. A secretary will answer your call and check with a nurse to see if you may visit. Sometimes the activity of caring for patients prevents visiting at the scheduled time. If this happens, you will be allowed to visit as soon as possible.

• Visiting loved ones who are critically ill or injured is not easy. You may feel a little frightened when you are in the unit visiting. There will be many machines in the room attached to the patient. Most of the machines have lights, displays, and make sounds. These machines
are used to support or monitor the patient. Please ask questions about the machines, tubes, and other equipment. The more you understand about what is going on, the more comfortable you will feel when visiting.

- **Suggestions for visiting your loved one:**
  - Let the patient know you are there. Even if the patient is not as alert as normal, a familiar voice can be a comfort.
  - Do not be afraid to touch the patient. Ask the nurse for help if you are uncomfortable with the equipment around the bed.
  - Be supportive. Let the patient know that you are there to help.
  - Listen when the patient wants to talk. If the patient cannot talk, writing notes may be possible. Ask the nurse for help.
  - Share the well wishes of friends and family.
  - Plan your visits to allow rest periods for both you and the patient.
  - Sometimes a patient may become restless or upset during your visit. Ask the nurse for help or suggestions.
  - Learn about the patient’s illness and care. Ask the nurse if printed materials are available.

- A private meeting room is available for doctor / nurse / family conferences. This room can be opened by a volunteer or a nurse.

- Having a loved one in an Intensive Care Unit for several days is exhausting. We encourage family members to obtain lodging so you can get enough rest and nutrition. Let the nurse know where you will be, so they may reach you if necessary. If you are uneasy about leaving, or need help finding somewhere close to stay, please ask the nurse, family support coordinator or the volunteer.

- We appreciate your help in keeping the waiting area clean. The area is for your comfort and convenience.

**Communicating with the Health Care Team**

- Most families feel that honest and current information is one of their most important needs. The health care team wants you to understand what is happening with your family member. They may need information from you, especially if the patient is not able to speak.
Here are some suggestions to help you to communicate:

- Get to know the members of the health care team. Arrange times to meet with them on a regular basis. The family support coordinator or nurse can help with this.
- Share information about your loved one, such as:
  - Past and present health problems
  - Medicines used
  - Drug and alcohol use
  - The patient’s support systems and who may be visiting the patient in the hospital
- The critical care nurse spends the most time with the patient and is a good source of information. Find out who the nurse is each shift.
- Seek information and ask questions. Make a list of questions or concerns to help you prepare for meetings with staff.
- Write down information you receive from hospital staff to help you remember.
- Let staff know when you do not understand something or if you feel you have received conflicting information.
- Identify a designated family spokesperson. This person can help to pass on information from the staff to the rest of the family. This family spokesperson receives the family contact information and will be instructed on how to get information by phone. This person is the only one who will be given phone updates about the patient’s condition. Make sure this person knows how to reach the hospital unit and that staff know how to contact him or her.

Taking Care of Yourself

Families have little or no time to prepare for the stress of a critical illness or injury. You may feel afraid, angry, helpless, anxious or guilty. Some physical signs of stress include headache, upset stomach or feeling shaky. You also may cry a lot or have trouble sleeping. These feelings are normal. You can easily become exhausted from the stress. Remember that you need to take care of yourself if you are to be of help to your loved one.
• Here are some suggestions to help you cope:
  ▶ Get as much rest as possible.
  ▶ Eat healthy meals. If you cannot eat a full meal, at least eat something.
  ▶ Take breaks from the waiting area by going for walks. Let the volunteer or the nurse know where you are going and when you will be back.
  ▶ Ask for help from friends, religious or spiritual advisors and hospital support services. Your friends may not know how to help you. Tell them what would be helpful to you, such as sitting with you in the waiting room, making dinner or taking in your mail.
  ▶ Talk with others about your feelings.
  ▶ Try reading, watching television or exercising to distract you and help you relax.
  ▶ Make time to take care of matters at home or work. Taking care of these matters means you will have less to worry about.
  ▶ Read the written materials given to you by staff. Ask questions if there is information you do not understand.
  ▶ Talk to the doctors, nurses or the family support coordinator if you have questions.