Coma

What is coma?
Coma means that a person does not respond in an appropriate way to what is around them. There are different levels of coma. In a very deep coma, a person may not respond at all or may react only to pain. A person can not speak and their eyes are closed. In a mild coma, a person may open their eyes, but not recognize things they see. They may move parts of their body, but with little purpose. You may see a person in a coma do some of these things:

- Move about in bed and become very restless
- Grasp your hand when you hold their hand
- Moan for no reason
- Move their mouth in a chewing or sucking motion
- Stiffen when you touch them

What causes coma?
Special parts of the brain control a person's ability to wake up and respond. Head injury, trauma, stroke, brain tumors, cardiac arrest or other medical conditions may cause a person to be in a coma.

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How long does coma last?

It is difficult to predict how long someone will be in a coma. Coma may last from days to years. Some people may never wake up from a coma, while others only partially recover. In most cases, a person does not suddenly just wake up from coma. It is most often a gradual process. Every person recovers at a different rate. As a person recovers, they may be able to do something one time and not be able to do it the next time. You may see them do some of these things:

- Look at you, but not know who you are
- Talk to you, but not make sense
- Have trouble remembering things
- Become more restless, pull at tubes or call out
- Look and act confused
- Behave differently than before the coma

What special care does a patient in coma need?

When a person is in a coma, they often are very restless and need special care to prevent them from hurting themselves. Nurses will give medicine to help calm a person who is restless. Soft cloth wrist restraints may be put on so they will not pull on tubes or dressings. Side rails on the bed must be kept up to prevent falling.

Care will also be done to prevent infections like pneumonia and bedsores. Therapy may be done to keep muscles and joints moving.

What can you do for a person in coma?

Family and friends are very important to a person in coma. Here are some things you can do:

- Talk to the person in a normal tone of voice. You do not need to talk loudly or yell. The person may be able to hear you, but can not respond. Tell them who you are and talk to them about everyday things. Tell them the date and time, the weather, and what things are happening at home. Talk with them about good times and friends and favorite topics such as sports, music or the news.
• Touch them. Tell them what you are going to do before you touch them so you will not surprise them. You may hold their hand, comb their hair, wipe their mouth, or help the nurse give them a back rub. Talk with the nurse to find out what you can do. Do not be afraid to touch them. You will not hurt them.

• Bring in a MP3 player or a radio for them to listen to. You may bring in recordings of their favorite music, or make your own recording so they may hear you talking to them. Let the nurses know what it is they like to listen to.

• Give the nurses a list of the person's favorite TV shows. The nurses will provide the TV for them to listen to or watch.

• Explain noises in the unit. The hospital is a new place with many noises that they will not recognize.

• Bring in pictures of family and friends. If the person opens their eyes, there will be familiar faces around. Label the pictures with the name of the person in the picture and how they are related. You may also bring in cards and posters.

• Bring in their favorite perfume or after shave. These smells are pleasant and familiar to them.

Doing these things may help a patient recover from coma. However, if there is too much stimulation, the person is may not be able to sort it out. They may react to over stimulation by not responding or by becoming very restless. They may also begin to breathe quickly. The nurse will help you learn when the person has had too much stimulation. When this happens, the stimulation needs to be reduced. Sometimes you may need to leave the room and let the patient rest.

Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.