

## **PHYSIOTHERAPY IN CRITICAL CARE**

### **A Guide for Patients and Relatives**

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This booklet has been designed by the physiotherapy service for patients, or relatives & friends of patients admitted to the Critical Care Unit who requires physiotherapy during their stay. By reading this booklet we hope that you learn what the recovery may involve & answer any questions that you may have.

If you have concerns at any time then please talk to the critical care physiotherapist or any of the staff who will be happy to try to help you.

#### **The Early Days**

A patient will have been admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU) because they are seriously ill and require close monitoring in a specialised environment.

The intensive care unit is staffed by many different people. Physiotherapists work as part of this team and have specialist skills to treat patients that are critically unwell.

It is now recognised that critical illness places not only physical stress on the body, but also psychological stress on patients, their families and friends. Being critically ill is a major life event and the staff in critical care all understand the impact that this can have on the patient and their family and friends. Physiotherapists have specialist skills to help prevent lung infection and when the time is ready they will help the patient to get mobile again. Not every patient who is on intensive care will require physiotherapy and patients will receive individual assessment if required.

Patients who are critically ill and on a ventilator are more at risk of developing a chest infection as the lungs are not functioning well enough to clear the build up of secretions. The physiotherapist will try to make sure the patient's lungs are clear. To do this they may advise on positions to lie in whilst in bed and perform 'clapping' on the chest to clear any phlegm. Patients will be given exercises if necessary to strengthen muscles to help them breathe without a ventilator (breathing machine). This will reduce the chances of them getting a lung infection. If a lung infection does occur, the physiotherapists will work to keep the chest clear of infection, improving air entry into the lungs and helping them to breathe more easily.

When patients are confined to bed and are unable to move because of tubes, lines and the effects of medication, the physiotherapist helps to maintain flexibility in muscles and joints by undertaking movements and stretches regularly. Sometimes patients may be given supports or splints to help to maintain good positions of arms and legs.

## **Exercise and Mobility**

Physiotherapists help patients to exercise in order to regain the strength and loss of function that goes hand-in-hand with critical illness and a prolonged stay in bed. Physiotherapists decide with the team when it is appropriate for patients to start exercises and these are a very necessary part of the recovery process. Early physiotherapy is safe and effective and can improve limb muscle strength and provide better independence upon hospital discharge.

Muscle loss and altered sensation during critical illness may affect balance and righting oneself may not be as easy as before the illness. It will take time and regular exercise to loosen joints, rebuild strength and regain mobility but treatment will be tailored to each individual's own needs.

As the patient regains independence they will be encouraged to:

- Set goals with their physiotherapist to structure rehabilitation and monitor their progress.

- Start to sit over the edge of the bed - with support to regain balance and awareness of their surroundings and begin simple exercises in this position.
- Spend time sitting in the chair – this can be achieved whilst still requiring ventilation.
- Spend increasing amounts of time in the chair which helps to strengthen muscles, assist with clearing secretions from the chest and helps to return the patient to a more normal routine.
- Start to practice standing – this can be achieved with the use of a special bed called a tilt table and, as strength improves, by using other equipment to assist this activity.
- Perform strengthening exercises with the physiotherapist. If an exercise programme has been developed it is important to continue with it regularly as advised.

It is normal to feel tired and possibly breathless with the exercises but it is important to participate to enhance recovery.

### **Moving to the ward**

Moving to the ward is a positive step in the recovery process. Patients will find that they are expected to do more for themselves and physiotherapy sessions will reflect a return of independence assisted by the nursing staff and possibly occupational therapists.

It is difficult to place a time scale on recovery as everyone recovers at a different rate. It also depends on a number of factors; such as age, previous level of fitness, degree and nature of the illness and the effort put into rehabilitation. Patients should not be alarmed if it takes weeks or months to return to normal. It may be necessary to receive a period of rehabilitation in another hospital close to home and there are services which offer continued physiotherapy after discharge if this is required and a physiotherapist can arrange this.

## **What can relatives and friends do to help**

Occasionally the physiotherapist may invite you to perform some arm and leg movements to maintain flexibility and give sensory input.

It may be useful at the right stage of rehabilitation to bring in some loose clothing and suitable footwear for exercise.

It is beneficial to maintain as normal a routine as possible and bringing in some personal belongings such as favourite books or music can help. For friends and family who wish to be more involved we recommend speaking to the physiotherapist.

## **Further Information**

Critical Care Unit – Physiotherapy staff available between 8.30am to 4.00pm Monday to Friday:

Royal Gwent Hospital – Tel. No:- 01633 - 234180

Nevill Hall Hospital – Tel. No:- 01873 - 732177

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy – [www.csp.org.uk/](http://www.csp.org.uk/)

ICU Steps (A support group for patients & families) – [www.icusteps.com](http://www.icusteps.com)

Intensive Care Society Patient & relative section –

[http://www.ics.ac.uk/ICS/Education/Patients\\_Relatives/ICS/patients-and-relatives.aspx?hkey=0a5f16cd-844e-44be-a455-c79dc6118cb2](http://www.ics.ac.uk/ICS/Education/Patients_Relatives/ICS/patients-and-relatives.aspx?hkey=0a5f16cd-844e-44be-a455-c79dc6118cb2)