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## What is the ICU (Intensive Care Unit)?

The Intensive Care Unit (ICU) is a unit in the hospital where seriously ill patients are cared for by specially trained staff. The ICU staff includes doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists, clinical nurse specialists, pharmacists, physical therapists, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, dietitians, social workers, and chaplains.

## What is Different About the ICU Compared to Other Hospital Units?

Care in the ICU differs from other hospital units.

- Seriously ill patients require close observation and monitoring. Specially trained nurses care for one or two patients at a time, each shift. ICU doctors are specially trained critical care doctors.
- Patients may have special equipment in their room, depending on their unique situation and condition. The equipment in the ICU may seem overwhelming. Patients are connected to machines to monitor their heart, blood pressure, and respiratory rate. Ventilators (breathing machines) help some patients breathe until they are able to breathe on their own.

## Visiting Guidelines for the ICU

- We request that visitors be limited to two at one time for patients in the ICU. **You are advised to stay inside the patient's room during your visit.** If you are asked to wait outside of the patient room, please return to the waiting area out of respect for other patient's privacy.
- Visitors will be asked by the ICU staff to leave for short periods during doctor's rounds, nurses' report, certain procedures, and emergencies.
- Doctor's Rounds: Doctor's rounds usually occur during the morning, early evening, and at midnight. Due to patient privacy issues and the close proximity of our patient rooms to each other, visitors will be asked to leave the unit occasionally when doctor's are rounding on their patients or the patients on either side of the patient they are visiting. Visiting may resume once the team is at least two doors away from the patient.
- Visitors are asked not to visit when they have potentially infectious conditions (for example: respiratory infections – "colds").

## Why Are Patients Admitted to the ICU?

Patients are admitted to the ICU for a variety of reasons. Some patients need close monitoring immediately after a major surgical operation or serious head injury. Others may have problems with their lungs that require ventilator support with breathing. Patients may have heart and blood vessel problems (for example, very low or very high blood pressure, a heart attack, or an unstable heart rhythm) needing observation. Patients in the ICU may have an imbalance in the level of chemicals, salts, or minerals in their bloodstream that require close monitoring as these levels are corrected. Also, patients may have a serious infection in their bodies that require specialized ICU care.

## What Can I Expect as a Patient or as a Family Member of a Patient in the ICU?

You can expect that the ICU staff will keep you well-informed of any major changes in the patient's condition or procedures that are being performed. You can expect to speak with a doctor on a regular basis. Members of the ICU team meet with the patient and/or family to ensure that everyone has a common understanding of the health condition and the plan of care. During these meetings, it is a good time for family members to ask any questions of the health care team.

It is important to understand that even though modern medicine has come a long way over the past 30 years, not all diseases can be treated or cured. Patients may be transferred to the ICU because there is a chance they may die without intensive care treatment. And sometimes, despite the use of specially trained staff and advanced technology, doctors may not be able to reverse the dying process.

Because patients in the ICU may be critically ill, they may be unable to speak on their own behalf. In this case, the doctors and nurses may ask the family what the patient would want done in the event that their heart or lungs fail. There are times when the doctors may recommend against the use of life support machines and treatments.

### Notes & Questions to Ask My Doctor

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## What Are Advance Directives?

Making decisions about the end of life can be very difficult. Often, decisions about end-of-life care are delayed until patients become very sick – too sick to make treatment decisions on their own. An Advance Directive (also called "health care proxy" or "living will") is a written statement completed in advance of a serious illness that states patients' wishes about their medical care. An Advance Directive allows patients to state what medical treatment choices they want or do not want if they become too sick to tell the doctor themselves.

One kind of Advance Directive under California law allows patients to select and name a person or "agent" who can make health care decisions on their behalf in the event that they are unable to speak for themselves. This legal document is called a "Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care." You may wish to speak with your family, close friends, or your doctor about your decision to complete an Advance Directive. Please ask the staff if you need further information on either an Advance Directive or a Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care.

**If you already have an Advance Directive, it is important to give a copy of that document to the hospital staff so that it can be kept in your medical record.**

## When Are Patients Transferred Out of the ICU?

Some people may think that staying in the ICU for a longer period of time is better than moving to another hospital unit. However, the ICU is designed to care for only seriously ill patients. So, when a patient is improving and moving towards recovery, he/she will be transferred to the next level of care that meets his/her individual medical needs.

## More Ways to Learn

Go to [www.cpmc.org/learning](http://www.cpmc.org/learning).

## Frequently Asked Questions

**Question: What is the ICU?**

Answer: The Intensive Care Unit (ICU) is a unit in the hospital where seriously ill patients are cared for by specially trained staff. The ICU staff includes doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists, clinical nurse specialists, pharmacists, physical therapists, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, dietitians, social workers, and chaplains.

**Question: What Can I Expect in the ICU?**

Answer: You can expect that the ICU staff will keep you well-informed of any major changes in the patient's condition or procedures that are being performed. You can expect to speak with a doctor on a regular basis. Members of the ICU team meet with the patient and/or family to ensure that everyone has a common understanding of the health condition and the plan of care. During this meeting, it is a good time for family members to ask any questions of the health care team.

**Question: What is an Advance Directive?**

Answer: An Advance Directive is a written statement completed by a patient in advance of a serious illness that states a patient's wishes about his or her medical care. An Advance Directive allows a patient to state what medical treatment choices he or she wants or does not want if he or she becomes too sick to tell the doctor themselves.

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Note: This information is not meant to replace any information or personal medical advice which you get directly from your doctor(s). If you have any questions about this information, such as the risks or benefits of the treatment listed, please ask your doctor(s).