

# Helping You To Recover

after critical illness

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This information sheet looks at what can help you to get stronger after critical illness. It includes general advice and exercises that may help you.



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## Introduction

Critical illness can affect all parts of your body. While you were in intensive care, physiotherapists will have provided very important care for you. They will have:

- worked with you to help you begin to do more things by yourself, for example by helping you with your balance and to start sitting or walking.
- given you exercises to help your breathing and your lungs, if you needed that help.
- given you exercises and advice about what to do when you get home to help you start to feel stronger.

This information sheet will help remind you what they showed you. If you have not received help from physiotherapists, it may give you an idea of what may be useful.

## What will help me get stronger?

To begin with, it can feel very difficult to do things that you might have been able to do easily before, such as sitting, walking or taking yourself to the toilet. It can feel like you're having to learn how to do these things again.

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*“Sometimes it can feel difficult or frightening to try and do things for yourself again”*

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Once you leave hospital, you might find it difficult to be back home because you may try to do more for yourself than when you were in hospital. This can make you feel very tired. Being home may make you realise that you are much weaker than you used to be than before your critical illness.

Sometimes it can feel difficult or frightening to try and do things for yourself again. It can feel frustrating and that you are making slow progress. It is important that you try to slowly build up the activities that you are doing, though, to help you get stronger. It might help to keep a diary of what you do each day, so you can look back and see how far you've come.

## Why does it help to be active?

To begin with, just sitting for short times, or trying to do small things to look after yourself (such as washing your face and doing your teeth) will be enough activity. It is normal to feel very weak and stiff when you first start trying to move around. But slowly try to do a little more each day.

Beginning to do more and move around more is an important part of your recovery. It can help many parts of your body, such as:

- your circulation (circulation is how blood moves around the body)
- your joints to move more easily
- your muscles to get stronger
- your heart and circulation (how blood moves around your body)
- your balance
- the strength of the muscles around your stomach and lower back, which help you to sit and stand.
- feeling less breathless
- moving mucus to help to keep your chest clear.

To begin with, just looking after yourself will be enough for you (such as washing, getting dressed or making yourself something to eat). As you begin to get stronger, you can work towards doing more activities around the house and getting back to the activities that you like doing.

If you are able to walk, this is a good way to help your strength and balance. When you feel able to, try to go for a walk each day. At first, this might be just walking round your house, or going up and down the stairs and walking around your garden. You can then try walking around outside once you feel stronger, and then walking a little further each time you do it.

You may have long term physical changes after your critical illness, for example you may now need to use a wheelchair. This means you may need to find different

activities to do as exercise than the ones you used to do. Your physiotherapist will be able to advise about different options to increase your activity and strength.

## Should I try and do things for myself if I find them difficult?

It is important that you do not let carers and family members do everything for you. For example, making yourself a drink, rather than letting others do this for you, helps you to get exercise and practice moving around again. People might think they are helping you by doing these tasks, but it is best if you can do things for yourself, if you are able to. By continuing to increase your activity levels, it helps to build up your strength. It is important to get a balance, though, and not to push yourself too hard, so do ask for help if you need it and to rest when you need to.

## Why am I breathless when I try to do more?

You may find that you become short of breath and feel breathless, even when doing very small movements such as standing up or turning over in bed. This is because your muscles have become weak after your critical illness, and this includes the muscles you use for breathing. For more information, and for things to help your breathing, see ICUsteps information sheet Breathing after Critical Illness.

## Why are my legs or arms swollen?

You may also find that your leg and arms are swollen or have extra fluid in them. This can happen as your circulation may have become more 'sluggish' whilst you were unwell.

To help this you can raise your arms on pillows, and your legs on a stool or footrest, to stop your hands and ankles swelling. Also, in this position you can do exercises that will help your circulation. For example, when you have your ankles raised up on a stool, pump your ankles up and down (see the exercises below). For your hands you can move your wrists up and down quickly and make fists firmly with your fingers and then release. You can repeat these up to 10 times. Do these exercises as often as you want to.

## Is it ok to sleep during the day if I need to?

When you were in intensive care your sleeping pattern may have changed. You may have found it very difficult to sleep at night, or you may have slept in the day a lot. It is important to try to get back to your normal sleeping pattern of sleeping mainly at night, if you can.

After critical illness you will feel tired and so you may want to sleep in the day. This is normal but it is best not to sleep for too long because it may affect your sleep at night. You may want to sleep only for a short time, for example about 30 minutes, and sleep in a light room, rather than making it dark so you don't get into a very deep sleep. If you think you will sleep for too long in the day, you can ask someone to wake you up or set an alarm.

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*“It is important that you get rest during the day, particularly as you will feel tired as you begin to do more activities”*

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It is important that you get rest during the day, particularly as you will feel tired as you begin to do more activities. It may help to find ways to rest that is not sleeping. You could try reading, listening to music, lying down and resting or relaxation techniques.

It is normal to have vivid or bad dreams after being critically ill. This may be because of the medication you had while in ICU. If this is a problem and you are finding it hard to sleep well at night, then talk to a healthcare professional about what might help.

## What exercises can I do to help get stronger?

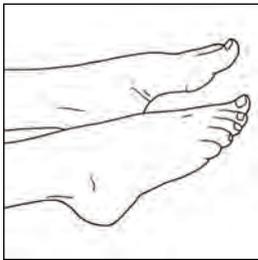
If you had help from physiotherapists when you were in hospital, they may have given you some exercises to do. Below are some exercises that you may have been given. Your exercises are an important way to build up your strength, but they may feel difficult to do at first. Build them up gradually and rest if you find

them too tiring or painful. They should become easier as you and your muscles become stronger.

This is a general information sheet, but if your physiotherapist suggests different exercises for you, please follow their advice as this will be for your individual needs.

## Bed Exercises

These exercises can be done when lying down. The number of times you repeat these exercises are just general guidelines and you can ask your physiotherapist for specific advice.



### Ankle Pumps

Point your toes down and bring them towards you.  
Repeat 5-10 times on the right and left side.



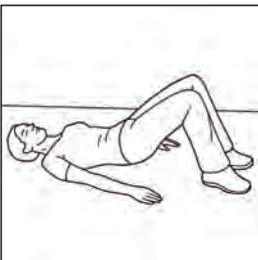
### Hip and Knee Flexion

Slide your heel towards your bottom bending your knee and hip. Repeat 5-10 times on the right and left side.



### Pelvic Tilts

With your knees bent, rock your pelvis back to flatten your back into the bed and then forwards. Repeat 5-10 times.

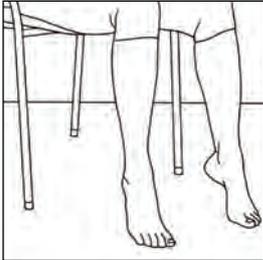


### Bridging

With your knees bent slowly tilt your pelvis as in the exercise above and continue to lift your bottom off of the bed and slowly lower back down. Repeat 3-5 times on the right and left side.

## Chair exercises

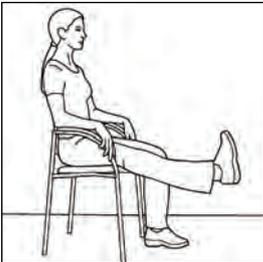
These exercises can be done sitting down.



### Toe Taps and Heel Lifts

Alternatively lift the heels and your toes off of the floor.

Repeat 5-10 times on the right and left side.



### Knee Extension

Straighten out one of your legs and hold for 3-5 seconds.

Repeat 5-10 times on the right and left side.



### Knee Marching

Sitting in the chair lift your knees alternatively up towards the ceiling as if you are marching on the spot. Repeat 5-10 times.



### Push ups

Bring your upper body forward slightly and place your hands on the arms of your chair. Push through your arms and try to lift your bottom up off the chair and slowly lower back to the start point. Repeat 3-5 times.

## Conclusion

It can take some time to recover from a critical illness. You can help yourself to get stronger by increasing what you do by slowly building up to getting back to normal activities. It's important that you don't push yourself too hard though, and you get the balance between doing activities and resting when you need to.

## More information

ICUsteps has other information sheets about critical illness, including *Breathing after a Critical Illness* and *Having a Tracheostomy*.

This website has useful information about recovery after critical care  
[www.criticalcarerecovery.com](http://www.criticalcarerecovery.com)

For simple relaxation exercises, see the NHS website:  
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/ways-relieve-stress/>  
and their video about relaxation before bed  
[www.nhs.uk/video/Pages/beditation.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/video/Pages/beditation.aspx)

For more information about exercises that can be done when sitting, see:  
[www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/uploads/chair-based-home-exercise-programme.pdf](http://www.torbayandsouthdevon.nhs.uk/uploads/chair-based-home-exercise-programme.pdf)  
[www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/sitting-exercises](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/sitting-exercises)

The National Institute of Health and Care Excellence have produced a clinical guideline called Rehabilitation after Critical Illness in Adults (CG83). This explains what rehabilitation they recommend for adults after intensive care.  
[www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg83](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg83).

There is information for patients and the public  
[www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg83/ifp/chapter/About-this-information](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg83/ifp/chapter/About-this-information)

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With thanks to Physio Tools Ltd for their permission to reproduce the exercises.

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