Children visiting the ICU

You are welcome to visit the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) at any time. We encourage family members and close friends to visit their loved ones as this can help the wellbeing of the patient and aid their recovery. We also welcome children to visit, however you may need to give this some thought before they visit.

All the staff working on the ICU realise that having a sick family member in ICU can be stressful for yourself and other family members, especially children, who may have many questions about why their relative is missing from family life.

Contact information

Intensive Care Unit
5th Floor, Lift Bank B
Chelsea and Westminster Hospital
369 Fulham Road
London
SW10 9NH

T: 020 3315 8516/8518
E: itu@chelwest.nhs.uk
W: www.chelwest.nhs.uk

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Patient Advice & Liaison Service (PALS)

If you require information, support or advice about our services, you can contact the PALS office on the Ground Floor of the hospital just behind the main reception.

Alternatively, you can feedback your comments/suggestions on one of our comment cards, available at the PALS office, or on a feedback form on our website www.chelwest.nhs.uk/pals.

We value your opinion and invite you to provide us with feedback.

T: 020 3315 6727
E: pals@chelwest.nhs.uk

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Children visiting the Intensive Care Unit (ICU)

A guide for relatives

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Notes

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February 2014

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Should I allow my child to visit?

This can be a hard decision for parents or carers to make as you may be unsure if it will harm or benefit your child—your decision may depend upon the age of the child, the condition of your relative and your child’s desire to visit.

Research has shown that children over the age of four mainly find visiting a sick relative helpful as it increases their understanding and involvement in their relative’s illness and reduces their feelings of separation and fear. However, do not force your child to visit if they do not wish to.

The decision to visit does lie with you, but the nursing staff and doctors caring for your relative will also be able to advise you and provide you with practical suggestions in managing a visit. Some other considerations for you are detailed next.

Age related considerations

Infants—babies aged less than 1 year do not have a fully developed immune system. Therefore, there is a very small risk that they might pick up an infection from the ICU. They will not be aware of the situation, but should the baby start to cry it would be best to leave the ICU.

Toddlers—young children aged less than 3 years will often want to see close relatives who are in ICU (parents, siblings, grandparents). They will not be able to understand what is happening and they may find it a frightening and scary place. If you decide that they should visit, they should be with an adult to make sure that they are kept safe and also explain, in very simple terms, what they can see. The visit should be kept short and last only a few minutes.

Children aged 3–6 years—some children of this age benefit from visiting a sick relative, whereas others may find the experience upsetting. Spend some time talking about what they will see before and during the visit. Children of this age may wish to draw a picture for their relative that can be kept at their bedside. Children in this age group should always visit with an adult and the visits should be kept to a few minutes at a time.

School-aged children—should be able to visit their sick relative. They need the situation explained to them and they should be encouraged to ask questions allowing for any misunderstandings that may have to be cleared up before the visit. They should not be left by themselves and should keep their visit to a maximum of 5–10 minutes.

Adolescents—should be able to visit their sick relative. Although they may fully understand the situation, it is important that they are supported by an adult and encouraged to ask questions to clarify any misunderstandings.

I don’t want my child to visit

If you choose not for your child to visit, please try to keep them involved by encouraging them to draw pictures to send to their relative, or recording a message that can be played to them.

If they ask questions about their relative, explain to them simply what is happening—for example, “Grandpa is in hospital as he is feeling very ill and is sleeping a lot, that’s why you haven’t been around to his house to see him.”

How can I support them?

Talk to them before their visit about what to expect—the environment of ICU, how their relative may look, smells, staff working there.

Be with them during the visit—make the time about them being with their family member. Be prepared for questions they may ask—talk to your nurse about this, they can help you explain the situation.

Talk about the visit and your relatives’ illness once you have returned home. Your child may have questions or may wish to talk through the experience with you.

Make sure that your child’s school or nursery is aware that you have a very sick relative. They can provide extra support to you and your child.

If you or your children are finding it hard to cope, please speak to your nurse as we can put you in touch with people who can help.

Simple Guidelines

If you do decide to bring your children on to ICU to visit a relative we ask you please:

• Only bring children to visit immediate family members, such as parents, siblings or grandparents.

• Do not bring in children who are unwell or have any signs of infections. Patients in ICU are very susceptible to infection. Please do not put them at risk.

• Do check that your children are up-to-date with their immunisations. If not, please don’t bring them in.

• Please ensure that your child is supervised by an adult at all times.

• The unit has lots of electrical equipment, tubing and wires. Please do not allow small children to play with them.

• Let the staff know when you will visit—we can then keep waiting to a minimum.

• We suggest that visits by children are kept to 5–10 minutes at a time. Any longer and they may become restless and bored.

• Try to come with another person who will be able to play with your child in the waiting room, giving you more time with your relative. Bring along some books, colouring in or handheld games consoles to keep them busy while waiting.

• Help us to maintain good infection control—when visiting always remove outside jackets and watches, and always wash hands when entering and leaving the ICU (you can also use the Alcogel from the dispensers at the entrance).

• Do not allow your child to sit on the bed, but they will be able to hold hands or give their relative a cuddle (ask your nurse to help with this).