Coronavirus (COVID-19) and the intensive care unit

Information for relatives

It is a very worrying time when your relative or friend is admitted to the intensive care unit especially during a time when everyone is very concerned about the COVID-19 infection.

This information leaflet is to let you and your family know what is happening on the intensive care unit and how it may affect you.

The vast majority of people to get the COVID-19 infection will have a mild illness that they can manage at home, like a bad cold or a flu-like illness. Some people who develop the COVID-19 infection need to come into hospital and a smaller number of these will need to come to the intensive care unit to be placed on a breathing machine (mechanical ventilator) and receive support for different organs. The intensive care unit staff are well prepared to look after these patients. Strict precautions will be in place to protect patients, families and staff members from being infected and spreading the infection. This leaflet will hopefully answer some of your questions.

Will I still be able to visit?

If you have been in contact with someone who has tested positive for the coronavirus, then you may be advised to self-isolate and so will not be able to visit the hospital until you have been given the all clear. This is following the advice from Public Health England.

We will have to limit the number and frequency of visitors to the unit, regardless of the clinical diagnosis of your relative or friend, and there may be times when we cannot allow any visitors at all. This is for your safety, but also to reduce the risk of spread of the virus from the hospital to the community and vice versa.

If you have chronic health problems yourself or are at increased risk of infections, then you should avoid visiting. We know how important seeing your loved one is during this difficult time, and ask for your patience and understanding. Our priority is to care for your relative or friend, but also to keep you, other patients, visitors and staff safe and well.

If your relative or friend has, or is suspected of having, COVID-19 - visiting will not be allowed. This is due to the risk that visiting poses to you, other members of the public and staff. We understand that this will be distressing for you.

Importantly, we ask you to nominate a single spokesperson for the family who can telephone in and speak to the bedside nurse or medical team, then pass on updates to everyone else. A password will be set up between this spokesperson and the staff to allow this.

What do I do if I think I have the infection?

Do not come into the hospital if you feel unwell in any way. If you are concerned that you are at higher risk of the infection then we would advise you not to visit the hospital at all. If you are concerned that you may have developed the COVID-19 infection, please stay at home and call 111 who will advise you what to do next.

If you cannot come in, then you can phone the intensive care unit and we will be able to give you updates on how your family member is doing.

Please note: we cannot test family members for COVID-19
Can we treat the infection?

As it is a virus, there is no specific treatment for it. Patients who need to come to the intensive care unit have become unwell as a result of the virus, or due to a complication they have developed related to the virus. This might be a pneumonia which is caused by bacteria, and so they will be treated with antibiotics. Patients may need to go on a ventilator to help get enough oxygen into the lungs. If they are very unwell then other organs will need support, for example drugs to bring blood pressure up and treatment for kidney failure. The doctors and nurses will explain what treatment they are providing and why.

Who can I talk to if I am worried?

The bedside nurse and the doctors will explain what is happening and answer your questions. Regular updates can be given over the phone and a password will be set up to allow this.

What can I do to help?

If you sneeze or cough you should use a tissue, bin it afterwards and then wash your hands or use alcohol gel. We know that the virus is more likely to be passed on from people touching surfaces that have the virus, so regular handwashing with soap and water or use of alcohol gel if there is no sink, is vital. It is standard practice for visitors to the intensive care unit to clean their hands with alcohol gel before they come in to visit and when they exit, and this still applies. There are a number of alcohol gel stations around the hospital and ICU.

When you are visiting your relative, we will explain what else you need to do. Please talk to the staff who will advise you.

What should I do to prevent catching and spreading the virus?

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water or use a sanitiser gel.
- Catch coughs and sneezes with disposable tissues.
- Throw away used tissues (then wash hands).
- If you don’t have a tissue use your sleeve.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are unwell.

Source: NHS