

# Communicating with your relative in Critical Care

**This leaflet has been produced to help you communicate with your relative while he/she is being cared for in Critical Care.**

**If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak your relative's doctor, nurse or speech and language therapist.**

## What is communication?

Communication is the ability to understand and express information through speech, writing, body movements or other signals. It is a vital part of our daily lives, allowing us to interact with others and our environment.

## Why is it difficult to communicate with my relative?

Your relative may find communication difficult for a number of reasons. He/she may:

- Not be very alert.
- Tire easily.
- Need help breathing with an artificial breathing machine (ventilator).
- Have lost muscle strength, for example facial muscles.
- Have neurological (brain or nerve) changes, for example stroke.
- Have reduced vision/hearing.
- Have had a tracheostomy tube fitted (see below for details).
- Be on drugs for pain relief/sedation, which may make them drowsy.

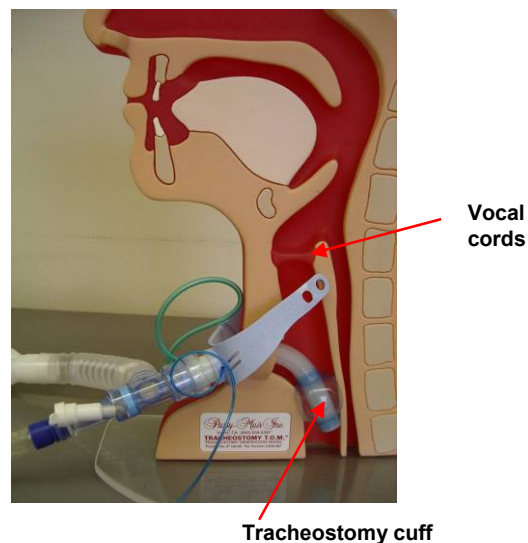
For these and other reasons, you may find it difficult to communicate with your relative.

This can leave both you and your relative feeling frustrated. Your relative may also feel isolated and alone.

## What if my relative has had a tracheostomy?

A tracheostomy is a procedure where the doctor creates a hole in the front of the neck. A tracheostomy breathing tube is placed in the windpipe below the voice box. A special type of tracheostomy with an inflatable cuff may be needed.

A cuff is a small balloon on the tracheostomy tube. When the balloon is inflated it ensures air flows in and out through the tracheostomy. When the cuff is inflated air does not pass through the voice box and your relative will not be able to use their voice. When it is safe, the critical care team may deflate the balloon on the tracheostomy and apply a one way valve. This may enable your relative to use his/her voice box again



## What can I do to help?

To help your relative communicate you might:

- Bring in your relative's glasses and hearing aids if applicable.
- Ask questions that require a simple yes/no answer, for example 'Are you feeling better today?'
- Encourage your relative to use facial expressions and gestures.
- Pay extra attention and allow more time when communicating with your relative.
- Repeat your relative's answers to make sure you have understood the message he/she is trying to get across.
- Clarify the topic of conversation.
- Minimise distractions and background noise, such as televisions.
- Speak calmly and clearly, don't shout.
- Encourage all attempts to communicate. Why not offer a pen and paper so that your relative can write down key words if they are able to?
- If your relative has a mobile phone you could try using typing to communicate.
- Critical care units have access to iPads with a communicator app installed; why not try this to help your relative express themselves?
- Contact the Speech & Language Therapy Department, who can offer advice regarding the use of communication aids, such as picture and alphabet charts and electronic communication aids.

Please let the staff caring for your relative know if your relative's first language is not English. This will help them to communicate better with your relative, and they will be able to arrange an interpreter or signer. Alternatively, call the Language Support Team on **020 7188 7798**.

## Contact us

**Speech & Language Therapy Department** - A Speech & Language Therapist will be able to offer specialist assessment and advice specific to individual patient needs.  
t: 020 7188 6246 at St Thomas' t: 020 7188 6233 at Guy's

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets)

### **Pharmacy Medicines Helpline**

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

**t:** 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

### **Your comments and concerns**

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

**t:** 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)

**t:** 020 7188 3514 (complaints) **e:** [complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk)

### **Language and accessible support services**

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch:

**t:** 020 7188 8815 **e:** [languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk)

### **NHS 111**

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

**t:** 111

### **NHS Choices**

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

**w:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

### **Get involved and have your say: become a member of the Trust**

Members of Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust contribute to the organisation on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it is up to you how much you get involved. To find out more, and to become a member:

**t:** 0800 731 0319 **e:** [members@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:members@gstt.nhs.uk) **w:** [www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership](http://www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership)

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