

Defining Common ICU Terms: Education for Family Members and Caregivers

When a loved one is in the Medical Intensive Care Unit (MICU), it's normal to feel a mix of emotions – overwhelmed, anxious, confused. You will likely have questions about the care they are receiving. The information we share with you may include unfamiliar terms for medical procedures, devices, and bodily processes. We want to make sure you have all the information you need to understand what is happening with your loved one's condition and care. We have created a list of words you may hear and what they mean. If you have any questions, please always ask a member of your care team.

An **arterial blood gas test (ABG test)** measures the amount of oxygen and carbon dioxide in a patient's blood. It also checks the acidity (pH balance) of the patient's blood. This tells us how well the patient is breathing. The blood sample for this test is taken from an artery rather than a vein.

An **arterial line (A-line)** is a tube inserted into one of the patient's arteries, usually in their wrist. It helps us track their blood pressure and draw blood for tests.

A **catheter** is a thin, flexible plastic tube. It usually helps us provide medication to a patient. You may hear us refer to several different types of catheters, which are placed in different parts of the body for different purposes.

A **central line** is a thin tube that is placed in a large vein in a patient's neck or groin. It is used to provide medication to the patient.

A **chest tube** is placed between a patient's ribs. It drains fluid or extra air from around their lungs.

Dialysis is a treatment that is used when a patient's kidneys are not functioning well. Our kidneys remove waste from our blood and making sure other fluids are well balanced. Dialysis helps remove extra fluid and waste from the blood when the kidneys cannot do it themselves.

Encephalopathy refers to a change in how a patient's brain is functioning. It can lead to a variety of issues impacting their thinking, movement, personality, and behavior. It is typically caused by disease or injury. There are different types of encephalopathy. Each type requires a different treatment to address the cause.

A **foley catheter** is a tube placed through a patient's urethra into their bladder. It is used to remove urine from their body.

Hemorrhagic shock occurs when a patient's body begins to shut down due to severe blood loss. Hemorrhagic shock can be caused by bleeding that is visible outside of the body (external bleeding) or bleeding that is happening inside the body (internal bleeding).

ICU delirium is a form of extreme confusion that some ICU patients develop. A patient with ICU delirium may feel extremely scared, angry, anxious, or upset, and they may not know why.

Intubation is a procedure that helps a patient breathe when they cannot breathe on their own. One end of a tube is connected to a ventilator (breathing machine). The other end is inserted through the patient's mouth into their main airway.

Kidney failure (renal failure) is when one or both of a patient's kidneys stop working. The kidneys are important organs that help keep us alive. Kidney failure is treated through dialysis or kidney transplant.

A **PEG tube (percutaneous gastrostomy tube)** is a feeding tube. It is placed directly through the skin of a patient's stomach. It is used to provide them with nutrition and medication. We may place a PEG tube if a patient cannot swallow on their own.

A **PICC line (peripherally inserted central catheter)** is a thin tube inserted into a vein in a patient's arm. It is then threaded through to the larger veins near their heart.

A **pulse oximeter** is a device that measures the amount of oxygen in a patient's blood. It is usually placed on the patient's finger, toe, or earlobe.

Respiratory failure is a serious condition that makes it difficult to breathe. When we breathe, our lungs take in oxygen and release carbon dioxide. Respiratory failure occurs when the blood does not have enough oxygen in it, has too much carbon dioxide, or both.

Sepsis occurs when a patient's body has a dangerous reaction to an infection. It can lead to serious complications like organ failure and even death. There are three stages of sepsis: sepsis, severe sepsis, and septic shock.

Septic shock is the final stage of sepsis. It is the most serious and dangerous stage. Septic shock always requires immediate treatment in the ICU.

Spinal tap (lumbar puncture) is a procedure during which we remove a small amount of fluid from around a patient's spinal cord. We then send the fluid to a lab for testing.

Tracheostomy is a procedure in which a small tube is inserted through a patient's neck into their main airway. This is considered safer and more comfortable long-term as compared to intubation.

Vasopressors are medications that help increase a patient's blood pressure. They are usually provided through a central line.

A **ventilator** is a machine that helps a patient breathe if they cannot breathe on their own. When someone is on a ventilator, you may hear it referred to as "mechanical ventilation".