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What is Post Intensive Care Syndrome?

After critical illness, life often doesn't spring back into place — it unfolds slowly, unevenly, and sometimes unexpectedly. At CC-SN, we see this every day. People describe the world feeling “tilted” or unfamiliar after ICU, and they wonder why simple things are suddenly harder or why their body seems to have its own agenda.

Post-Intensive Care Syndrome (PICS) can leave you with muscle weakness, nerve changes, fatigue, and difficulties with concentration or memory. These aren't personal failings — they're the natural consequences of a body and brain that have been through extraordinary stress. Many survivors tell us their arms tire too fast, their balance feels unreliable, or their hands tingle and don't behave the way they used to. Others describe a kind of constant internal wobble, where even standing or focusing can feel like hard work.

These changes can be frightening, but they're also common, and they're not a measure of how strong or determined you are. Recovery is rarely a straight line. It's more often a mix of progress, setbacks, small wins, and patience. At CC-SN we try to make space for all of that — the physical challenges, the emotional weight, the slow rebuilding of confidence, and the quiet celebration of each step forward.

You're not imagining it. You're not alone. And you're not expected to figure it out by yourself. We're here to help you understand what's happening, make sense of the “new normal,” and support you as you move through recovery at your own pace.

Understanding PICS (Post-Intensive Care Syndrome)

A guide from CC-SN to help patients, families and carers navigate life after intensive care.

Surviving a stay in intensive care is a huge milestone — but the journey doesn't end at discharge. Many people discover that weeks, months or even years later, they're still dealing with changes to their body, mind or emotions.

These challenges are common. They're real. And they have a name: **Post-Intensive Care Syndrome, or PICS.**

At CC-SN, we meet survivors and families every day who are navigating this exact stage of recovery. This guide is here to help you understand what PICS is, why it happens, and how we can support you.

What Is PICS?

PICS describes the combination of physical, cognitive and emotional difficulties that can appear after a stay in an intensive care unit. It doesn't matter whether someone was admitted due to infection, surgery, an accident or respiratory failure — the ICU environment itself places extraordinary stress on the body and brain.

Sedation, ventilation, powerful medications and long periods without normal movement disrupt almost every system in the body.

PICS is not your fault. It's not "in your head." It's a recognised and very common part of ICU recovery.

Even if a patient remembers little or nothing of their ICU stay, the effects of it can last for some time.

How PICS Can Affect You

1. Physical changes

These are often the first changes survivors notice:

- Loss of strength and stamina. Muscles waste quickly in ICU. Everyday tasks like standing, walking or climbing stairs may feel unexpectedly hard.
- Nerve or muscle problems. Tingling, numbness, weakness, shaking or reduced dexterity — especially fine motor control — can affect day-to-day activities.
- Balance and co-ordination difficulties. Many people feel unsteady or dizzy, especially on stairs, uneven ground or at height.
- Breathlessness and fatigue. Even small activities can be tiring while the body rebuilds strength and stamina.
- ICU peripheral neuropathy is nerve damage caused by critical illness. It can affect:
 - Sensory nerves: numbness, tingling, altered sensation, unexplained pain
 - Motor nerves: weakness, reduced control, difficulty with movement
 - Autonomic nerves: problems with heart rate, blood pressure, digestion and temperature

2. Cognitive changes ("brain fog")

Many survivors describe feeling "not quite themselves," especially early on.

- Common changes include:
 - Difficulty concentrating
 - Short-term memory problems
 - Slower thinking
 - Trouble planning, organising or multi-tasking

These symptoms can feel unsettling and frustrating, but they are a normal part of recovery and can improve with time.

3. Emotional and psychological effects

ICU is not just a medical event — it can be a traumatic one.

People often experience:

- Anxiety or persistent worry
- Low mood or depression
- Irritability or emotional swings
- Nightmares or intrusive thoughts
- Feeling overwhelmed or unsure of yourself

You may not consciously remember everything that happened in ICU — but your body does, and it continues processing that trauma long after discharge.

What About Families? — PICS-F

PICS-F (Post-Intensive Care Syndrome – Family) describes the emotional, psychological and sometimes physical impact that an ICU admission has on families and carers.

Common experiences include:

- Anxiety and hypervigilance
- Depression or low mood
- Sleep problems
- Exhaustion
- Post-traumatic stress symptoms
- Difficulty coping with uncertainty or ongoing care needs

The stress of witnessing a loved one critically ill — often for long periods — can leave lasting effects.

Why Does PICS Happen?

During an ICU stay, the body enters full survival mode. You may have experienced:

- Sedation or coma
- Strong medications
- Long periods with limited or no movement
- Disrupted sleep and day–night patterns
- Mechanical ventilation
- Severe inflammation from illness or infection

These lifesaving treatments can also lead to physical deconditioning, neurological changes and emotional distress.

PICS is the natural result of the body and mind trying to rebuild after crisis.

How Long Does PICS Last?

Recovery is highly individual. Some people improve within months; others take longer. Progress is rarely linear — plateaus and setbacks are normal.

Survivors often describe recovery as good days, bad days, and days that surprise you. Healing does happen — slowly, unevenly and gradually.

Pace yourself, ask for help when you need it, and recognise progress, even if it feels small.

What Helps Recovery?

At CC-SN, we encourage survivors and families to focus on:

Rehabilitation

- Our weekly rehab sessions help rebuild strength, balance and confidence through practical, achievable activities.
- Emotional Support
- Each week we run two peer-support groups and encourage access to psychological services to help process trauma, manage PTSD symptoms and support recovery of mood and confidence.
- Education and Understanding
- Learning about PICS helps patients and families understand what's happening — and reassures you that recovery is still underway long after the ICU stay ends.
- Routine and Rest
- Regular activity, paired with planned rest, prevents exhaustion and promotes steadier, more sustainable progress.
- Clear, realistic expectations
- Recovery takes time — not willpower.

You're Not Alone

If you're experiencing PICS, you are part of a large community of ICU survivors who share the same questions, frustrations and challenges. Many people have never heard of PICS until they find themselves living with it.

Whether you're a patient, family member or carer, we want you to know that what you're experiencing is real. It is increasingly recognised, and with time and support, it can get better.