Nutritional support for critically ill patients: Evidence-based practices.

Russell Feifer*

Department of Agricultural and Food Sciences, University of Bologna, Italy

Introduction

The nutritional needs of critically ill patients are complex and vary significantly depending on the severity of their condition, underlying comorbidities, and the type of care they require. Nutritional support plays a crucial role in the recovery and overall outcomes of these patients, as it influences metabolic responses, immune function, and tissue healing. This article examines the evidence-based practices surrounding nutritional support for critically ill patients, highlighting key aspects such as assessment, enteral and parenteral nutrition, timing, and specific considerations for different patient populations [1].

The first step in providing appropriate nutritional support is accurate assessment. Critically ill patients are often at risk for malnutrition due to factors like inadequate intake, metabolic stress, and catabolism. Tools such as the Subjective Global Assessment (SGA), Nutritional Risk Score (NRS), and the Malnutrition Universal Screening Tool (MUST) can be used to identify patients at risk of malnutrition. Early nutritional assessment helps in the timely initiation of interventions to improve patient outcomes. It is important to evaluate the patient's energy expenditure, protein requirements, and micronutrient needs to develop an individualized plan [2].

Enteral nutrition (EN) is the preferred method for providing nutrition to critically ill patients, as long as the gastrointestinal (GI) tract is functioning. Evidence supports that EN improves outcomes by maintaining gut integrity, reducing the risk of infection, and enhancing overall healing. The use of enteral feeding tubes, such as nasogastric or nasojejunal tubes, allows for the direct delivery of nutrients. A key benefit of EN is its ability to stimulate the gut's mucosal barrier, which is essential for preventing bacterial translocation and subsequent infections. However, the decision to initiate EN must be carefully balanced against the risk of aspiration and the patient's ability to tolerate feeding [3].

The timing of nutritional support is critical for critically ill patients. Recent evidence suggests that early initiation of nutritional support—ideally within the first 24-48 hours of admission to an intensive care unit (ICU)—can reduce complications such as infection, muscle wasting, and length of stay. Early nutrition helps mitigate the negative impact of the catabolic state induced by critical illness. However, in cases of severe shock, hemodynamic instability, or bowel dysfunction, the timing of nutrition may need to be delayed until the patient stabilizes. In these cases, clinicians should carefully monitor the patient's clinical status and reassess the appropriateness of early feeding [4].

When enteral nutrition is contraindicated or not feasible due to GI dysfunction, parenteral nutrition (PN) may be considered. PN involves the intravenous delivery of nutrients, bypassing the GI tract entirely. Evidence indicates that while PN is effective in providing nutrition, it should be reserved for patients who cannot tolerate enteral feeding, as prolonged use of PN is associated with complications such as infections, liver dysfunction, and metabolic disturbances. Studies emphasize that the use of PN should be carefully monitored and utilized in conjunction with appropriate clinical criteria to minimize potential risks [5].

One of the most significant components of nutritional support in critically ill patients is adequate protein intake. Protein plays a vital role in maintaining muscle mass, supporting immune function, and promoting tissue repair. Critically ill patients often experience a state of negative nitrogen balance due to increased protein catabolism, which can lead to muscle wasting and delayed recovery. Recent guidelines recommend that patients receive at least 1.2-2.0 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight per day, depending on the severity of illness and specific needs. This protein intake helps support recovery, improve outcomes, and reduce the risk of complications such as pressure ulcers and ventilator-associated pneumonia [6].

Micronutrient deficiencies are common in critically ill patients due to inadequate dietary intake and increased nutrient requirements during illness. Vitamins and minerals such as vitamin D, vitamin C, zinc, and selenium are essential for immune function and wound healing. Studies have shown that supplementation of these micronutrients can improve patient outcomes, particularly in those with deficiencies. For example, vitamin D has been linked to improved immune response and reduced risk of infections in critically ill patients. Therefore, a targeted approach to micronutrient supplementation, based on the patient's specific needs and clinical condition, is important for optimizing recovery [7].

Different patient populations may have unique nutritional requirements that must be addressed in the critical care setting. For instance, burn victims, trauma patients, and those undergoing major surgeries often have significantly higher caloric and protein needs due to the stress response and tissue repair demands. On the other hand, patients with sepsis or

***Correspondence to:** Russell Feifer, Department of Agricultural and Food Sciences, University of Bologna, Italy. E-mail: Russel@gmail.com

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organ failure may require adjusted nutrient intake to avoid overfeeding and to mitigate the risk of refeeding syndrome. Nutritional support should be tailored to the patient's specific metabolic demands, comorbidities, and treatment plan to optimize recovery and minimize complications [8].

Refeeding syndrome is a potentially life-threatening condition that can occur when severely malnourished patients receive excessive nutrition too quickly. It is characterized by metabolic disturbances, including electrolyte imbalances (especially hypophosphatemia), fluid retention, and cardiovascular complications. To prevent refeeding syndrome, nutritional support should be introduced gradually, starting at a lower caloric intake and progressively increasing as the patient's tolerance improves. Monitoring of electrolytes, particularly phosphorus, magnesium, and potassium, is essential during the initial stages of feeding [9].

Ongoing monitoring and adjustment of nutritional support are essential in critically ill patients. Nutrition goals should be reevaluated regularly based on clinical progress, lab results, and tolerance to the feeding regimen. Nutritional interventions may need to be altered if the patient develops complications, such as fluid overload, gastrointestinal intolerance, or worsening organ function. The use of biomarkers such as serum albumin, prealbumin, and CRP (C-reactive protein) can help assess the adequacy of nutrition and the need for adjustments. Close communication between the dietitian, clinical team, and patient is vital for effective nutrition management [10].

Conclusion

Nutritional support is a cornerstone of care for critically ill patients, with a profound impact on recovery, infection rates, and overall survival. Evidence-based practices, such as early initiation of enteral nutrition, individualized protein and caloric goals, and careful management of micronutrients, are essential for optimizing outcomes. By implementing appropriate strategies, tailoring nutrition to the patient's condition, and utilizing a multidisciplinary approach, healthcare providers can significantly enhance the quality of care and improve recovery in critically ill patients.

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