When several organs are affected by illness

If more than one organ needs support, ask the physician to explain how the treatments fit together. Start with the change that matters most for your loved one today.

After critical illness, more than one organ may need support. The team considers the lungs, heart, kidneys and other affected systems together because a change in one can alter another treatment.

What Is Multiple Organ System Failure?

When the inflammation from a severe infection or injury causes dysfunction in two or more organ systems, this is called multiple organ system failure. Often, patients experiencing multiple organ system failure have already been admitted to the hospital to treat underlying or connected conditions, such as hypoperfusion and hypermetabolism. Unfortunately, multiple organ system failure, also known as Multiple Organ Failure (MOF) or Multiple Organ Dysfunction Syndrome (MODS), can be fatal. There's no single answer to what causes organ failure, and depending on the patient, there can be many factors involved. However, organ failure can be triggered by sepsis, an extreme response to an infection which causes inflammatory chemicals to be released into the bloodstream.

When several organs are under stress, clinicians follow changes in breathing, circulation, kidney function, liver function and alertness. A fast heart rate, rapid breathing, fever, low urine output or confusion may be important, depending on the situation. Infection in the bloodstream, lung failure and other complications can occur in different sequences. There is no single timetable for deterioration or recovery. Ask which organs need support today and what the team is monitoring most closely.

Multiple Organ Failure Symptoms By Organ

Multiple organ dysfunction syndrome can affect any or all of six organ systems: respiratory, cardiovascular, renal, hepatic, neurologic and hematologic. Critically ill patients with signs of failure in any of these systems need immediate clinical intervention to recover.

Lung/Respiratory

Respiratory failure can happen as a result of injury, infection, or surgical complications. Signs include difficulty breathing, anxiety, sweating, and bluish skin. Patients with respiratory failure may become ventilator dependent during their care.

Heart/Cardiovascular

Heart failure can occur when the heart muscle is too weak or stiff to pump blood properly. Signs include irregular heartbeat, weakness, inability to exert oneself, and swelling in the lower extremities. Heart failure can lead to both kidney and liver damage, as the blood flowing from the heart to the kidneys may decrease, and the liver may experience pressure from fluid buildup.

Kidney/Renal

Acute renal failure happens when the kidneys are not able to filter waste from the blood. When the kidneys lose this ability, dangerous levels of waste can accumulate, and the blood's chemistry may become unbalanced. Signs include nausea, seizures, reduced urine production, swelling in the lower extremities, and chest pain.

Liver/Hepatic

Liver failure occurs when large parts of the liver become damaged beyond repair and the liver can no longer function. It can happen gradually, over many years, or acutely, within as little as 48 hours. Signs include nausea, abdominal pain and swelling, and yellowing of the eyes and skin.

Brain/Neurologic

Because the brain controls the other systems of the body, neurological dysfunction can take many forms. However, an altered state of consciousness is a common manifestation of neurological failure associated with MODS.

Blood/Hematologic

Bleeding in the gastrointestinal tract or breaks in the skin is common when someone is experiencing multiple organ failure. This can be very difficult to control or stop.

What Is The Best Path To Multiple Organ Failure Recovery?

Currently, there is no drug or therapy that can reverse organ failure. However, organ function can recover to some degree. Doctors have discovered that some organs recover better than others. Multiple organ failure recovery can be a slow and challenging process. Early detection is very important when treating multiple organ failure. ICU treatment at a traditional hospital is typically only the first stage of recovery. Once a patient has moved into transitional care, there are options for supporting specific organ systems, including mechanical ventilation and dialysis.

Ask which organ needs the greatest support today, what change would show treatment is helping and which part of the plan could change tomorrow. Progress may differ from one organ system to another.

Archived recovery account

This account describes care in an earlier setting. The course, timing and outcome belong to that individual.

The patient had endured a long waiting period for a heart transplant as her birth heart was failing. When she was finally able to have the transplant performed at the beginning of the year, she unfortunately developed multi-organ failure and numerous complications, including acute respiratory failure. Her physicians worked hard to stabilize her condition and finally managed to wean her from the ventilator nearly a month after her transplant. The patient was able to be transferred to the treating hospital where she would begin to receive additional respiratory therapy to strengthen her lungs, and rehabilitation to enable her to reclaim her independence and return home.

The patient was completely dependent on her team of caregivers for all her needs as she was extremely debilitated and couldn't even lift her arms or legs on her own. She was guided by her physical and occupational therapists who worked with her seven days a week until she was finally able to stand and walk on her own and take care of her daily needs. Her speech pathologist helped her reclaim the ability to speak using a voice valve at first and then, when the breathing tube had been removed, the patient was able to once again speak with her own voice and begin to drink and eat a normal diet.

Before discharge, she recalled periods of confusion and depression and credited the people who supported her throughout recovery.

Resources:

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK6868/

MedlinePlus describes critical care for people who need close monitoring and support for vital organs during serious illness. https://medlineplus.gov/criticalcare.html

The CDC explains how a severe response to infection can damage tissues and lead to organ failure, and why rapid evaluation matters. https://www.cdc.gov/sepsis/about/index.html

MedlinePlus describes the support used for respiratory failure, one complication that can occur when several organs are affected by critical illness. https://medlineplus.gov/respiratoryfailure.html

Further reading on this topic — https://medlineplus.gov/criticalcare.html

MedlinePlus explains how liver disease can affect the body and where to find information about liver function, evaluation and treatment. https://medlineplus.gov/liverdiseases.html

Talk with Lakeview

For questions about a possible stay, call Lakeview Admissions at (262) 534-8509. During a stay, ask the bedside nurse who can help with your question.

https://www.lakeviewsystem.com/long-term-acute-care