International Journal of Advance Research in Medical Surgical Nursing

E-ISSN: 2663-2268
P-ISSN: 2663-225X
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.67
www.surgicalnursingjournal.com
IJARMSN 2025; 7(2): 223-229
Received: 12-08-2025
Accepted: 15-09-2025

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Evaluate the effectiveness of nurse-driven early mobility protocols among ICU patients at a selected hospital of Dehradun

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DOI : https://www.doi.org/10.33545/surgicalnursing.2025.v7.i2c.289

Abstract
Background: Prolonged immobility among intensive care unit (ICU) patients contributes to muscle weakness, delayed weaning from ventilators, and poor post-discharge quality of life. Nurse-driven early mobility protocols aim to promote safe and progressive movement in ICU patients to prevent functional decline.
Objectives: To assess ICU patients' condition before and after implementing nurse-driven early mobility protocols, evaluate the protocol's effectiveness, and identify associations with demographic variables.
Methods: A quasi-experimental pilot study with control and experimental groups was conducted among 24 ICU patients at Aarogyadham Super Speciality Hospital & Research Centre, Dehradun. Data were collected using a structured mobility assessment scale. The experimental group received nurse-driven mobility interventions, while the control group received routine care. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including paired and independent *t*-tests and Chi-square tests.
Results: In the experimental group, mean patient condition scores improved from 8.33 (SD = 1.77) to 12.25 (SD = 1.48), with a mean difference of 3.92 ($t = 8.32$, $p<0.001$). The control group showed only minor improvement (mean = 9.3 → 10.21; $t = 1.38$, $p>0.05$). No significant associations were found between demographic variables and mobility outcomes.
Conclusion: The nurse-driven early mobility protocol significantly improved the condition of ICU patients in the experimental group, demonstrating its feasibility and potential for large-scale implementation.

Keywords: Early mobility, nurse-driven protocols, ICU patients, functional recovery, Dehradun

Introduction
Survival from critical illness has improved steadily with advances in intensive care; nevertheless, many survivors experience profound and persistent disability driven largely by immobility during their ICU stay. Prolonged bed rest, deep sedation, invasive devices, and organ-support therapies contribute to deconditioning, intensive-care-unit-acquired weakness (ICU-AW), and neuropsychological sequelae that impede recovery long after discharge. Observational and interventional studies link immobility to longer durations of mechanical ventilation, extended ICU and hospital length of stay (LOS), greater healthcare utilization, and diminished health-related quality of life. [1, 2]
ICU-acquired weakness an umbrella term encompassing critical illness polyneuropathy and myopathy affects a substantial proportion of ICU patients and is strongly associated with adverse short- and long-term outcomes, including increased mortality and reduced likelihood of functional independence. [3, 4] Prevention strategies consistently emphasize early mobilization as a core component, alongside sepsis control, glycaemic management, and sedation minimization.
Against this backdrop, early mobility (EM) has emerged as a pragmatic, systems-level intervention designed to counteract the harms of immobility. EM encompasses a graded spectrum of activities from in-bed range-of-motion and active exercise to sitting, standing, transfers, and ambulation initiated early in the ICU course and delivered by a multidisciplinary team. Although "early" is variously defined (often within 24-48 hours of ICU admission or within the first 2-5 days of critical illness), the conceptual commonality is earlier and more progressive physical activity than historical practice. [5-7] Importantly, systematic reviews note substantial heterogeneity in timing and content and call for clearer

operational definitions to standardize practice and research. [8, 9]

The seminal randomized trial by Schweickert *et al*. (2009) combined daily sedation interruption with physical and occupational therapy beginning at the onset of mechanical ventilation. Compared with usual care, patients in the intervention arm achieved superior functional outcomes at hospital discharge and experienced more ventilator-free and ICU-free days establishing proof-of-concept that very early, active rehabilitation is both feasible and beneficial in the modern ICU.[10] Subsequent syntheses and narrative reviews reinforce that EM can improve physical function, reduce delirium, and shorten ICU/hospital LOS, while acknowledging variability in effect sizes across populations and protocols. [4, 6, 11]

Evidence syntheses provide an important, nuanced counterbalance. The 2018 Cochrane Review concluded that while early mobilization/active exercise may reduce sequelae of critical illness, the certainty of evidence for functional outcomes, muscle strength, and health-related quality of life was limited at that time owing to small samples, heterogeneity, and risk of bias; ongoing studies were expected to refine estimates. [12] This underscores the practical reality that effectiveness depends on local context, implementation fidelity, inter-professional coordination, and patient selection.

Concurrently, the ICU Liberation (ABCDEF) bundle has operationalized EM ("E") alongside pain/sedation, delirium, and family engagement into an implementation framework associated with reduced delirium/coma days, lower short-term mortality, and improved mobility. Nurse-led or nurse-coordinated approaches are pivotal to bundle reliability because bedside nurses orchestrate readiness screening, coordinate with respiratory therapy and physiotherapy, and titrate sedation to enable participation. [13]

Recent literature has also focused more explicitly on nurse-driven EM protocols. A contemporary meta-analysis suggests nurse-led EM can reduce ICU and hospital LOS, even as effects on strength/mobility metrics vary an effect pattern consistent with the pragmatic benefits of earlier activity despite measurement differences across studies. Importantly, heterogeneity remains substantial, reinforcing the need for context-specific piloting and adaptation. [14, 15]

Despite global momentum, adoption in many Indian ICUs is uneven due to resource variability, staffing patterns, sedation practices, and concerns about safety with lines/tubes and vasoactive infusions. Implementation science experiences from other regions emphasise that protocol feasibility, safety workflows (e.g., managing femoral lines, CRRT), sedation readiness, and staff confidence are decisive determinants of success. A pilot study in a Dehradun tertiary setting can therefore (i) establish local feasibility and safety, (ii) quantify pre-post signal of benefit under nurse-driven coordination, and (iii) surface contextual barriers/facilitators (e.g., equipment, staffing, training) to inform a definitive trial and scale-up. [9, 16]

Mechanistic plausibility further supports the evaluation of EM: it may improve lung mechanics and gas exchange (increasing tidal volume and ventilation heterogeneity), augment hemodynamics and perfusion, mitigate inflammation-induced myopathy/neuropathy, preserve proprioception and balance, and reduce neuro-psychiatric complications through delirium mitigation and structured daytime activity mechanisms that map to outcomes ICU teams value (ventilator days, LOS, discharge disposition, functional status). [9, 16].

Taken together, the literature supports EM as a promising, nurse-implementable intervention with real-world relevance, yet emphasises the need for site-specific pilot data to guide protocol design, training, and outcome-selection. The present pilot is designed to generate such data in the North Indian context, using a pragmatic, nurse-driven protocol and clinically salient outcomes.

Methods

Study Design and Setting

This quasi-experimental, parallel-group, pre-test/post-test pilot study was conducted in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of *Aarogyadham Super Speciality Hospital & Research Centre*, Dehradun, India. The ICU is a mixed medical-surgical unit staffed around the clock by intensivists, critical-care nurses, respiratory therapists, and physiotherapists. The two-week pilot (14-28 April 2025) aimed to assess feasibility, refine procedures, and estimate effect sizes for a future large-scale study.

Participants and Sampling

A total of 24 adult ICU patients meeting eligibility criteria were enrolled using convenience sampling and randomly assigned (1:1) into two groups. The experimental group (n=12) received routine ICU care along with a nurse-driven early mobility (EM) protocol, whereas the control group (n=12) received routine care only.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion criteria included adults aged ≥18 years, hemodynamically stable (MAP ≥65 mmHg, no vasopressor escalation in prior 4 hours), and able to tolerate mobility activities ($FiO_2 \leq 0.6$, PEEP ≤ 10 cmH_2O, $SpO_2 \geq 90\%$, HR 50-120 bpm). Patients were excluded if they had contraindications to mobilization such as unstable fractures, open abdomen/chest without clearance, active ischemia, raised intracranial pressure, severe agitation, or other instability as judged by the attending physician. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants or their legal representatives.

Randomization and Blinding

Participants were randomized using a computer-generated sequence and allocation concealed in sealed opaque envelopes. Due to the nature of the intervention, participant and bedside nurse blinding was not possible; however, the outcome assessor, a senior nurse uninvolved in intervention delivery, was blinded to group assignment.

Intervention: Nurse-Driven Early Mobility Protocol

The EM protocol was initiated within 48 hours of ICU admission and progressed through four stages:

- **Stage 0-1:** Passive/active limb movements, in-bed cycling, and bed-in-chair positioning.
- **Stage 2:** Supported edge-of-bed sitting with upper-limb and marching exercises.
- **Stage 3:** Sit-to-stand and standing tolerance training.
- **Stage 4:** Ambulation within room or corridor with assistance.

Each session lasted 15-30 minutes, conducted 1-2 times

daily, 5-7 days a week, based on patient tolerance. Sessions were delivered by trained ICU nurses under physiotherapist supervision. Safety parameters such as heart rate, blood pressure, and SpO_2 were continuously monitored; any adverse response led to session termination and medical review. A structured checklist was used for documenting exercises, duration, and adverse events.

Control Group

The control group continued to receive standard ICU care, including repositioning and pressure-injury prevention, without the structured progressive EM ladder.

Outcome Measures

The primary outcome was the change in patient general condition using the *Mobility Assessment Scale (MAS)*, which rates level of consciousness, muscle strength, range of motion, and sitting/standing ability. Scores were classified as *Poor* (<50%), *Fair* (51-65%), or *Good* (>65%). Secondary outcomes included the proportion of patients achieving "Good" condition, feasibility indicators (eligibility, recruitment, adherence), and adverse events.

Data Collection and Tool Validation

Data were recorded using structured case report forms including demographic information, MAS scores, and EM session details. The instruments were validated by nine experts from nursing, physiotherapy, and biostatistics, achieving a split-half reliability coefficient of 0.76. ICU nurses underwent a two-hour training session to standardize intervention delivery and MAS scoring.

Data Management and Analysis

Data were double-entered into a secured SPSS v25 database with range and consistency checks. Descriptive statistics summarized demographics, while paired t-tests and Chi-square tests assessed pre-post differences and associations. Between-group comparisons were made using independent t-tests or Mann-Whitney U tests where applicable. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated, and statistical significance was set at $p<0.05$.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the *Aarogyadham Super Speciality Hospital & Research Centre Ethics Committee* (Ref. No. [insert ID]). It adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki principles, ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality, and data protection.

Feasibility Evaluation

Feasibility was judged based on achieving ≥70% recruitment of eligible patients, ≥75% intervention adherence, and a serious adverse event rate <2%. Additionally, a brief five-item staff feedback survey assessed perceived safety, workload, and acceptability of the nurse-driven EM protocol.

Results

Demographic data

A total of twenty-four intensive care unit (ICU) patients participated in the study, with twelve patients assigned to the experimental group who received routine care along with the nurse-driven early mobility (EM) protocol, and twelve patients to the control group who received routine care only. Both groups were comparable in their baseline demographic and clinical characteristics. The majority of patients were between 26 to 35 years of age (33.33%) and over 45 years (25%) in both groups. Gender distribution revealed that males constituted 58.33% of the experimental group and 50% of the control group. Most participants (66.66%) had body weight ranging between 60-70 kg and a height between 5 to 6 feet. The most common clinical diagnoses were sepsis, shock, and organ failure. The majority of patients (45.83%) had an ICU stay of less than 10 days, with only a few exceeding 30 days. Thus, the two groups were demographically homogeneous and comparable before the intervention.

Section 1: Assess the general condition of patients in experimental and control group

a. Level of General Condition of Patients in Experimental Group

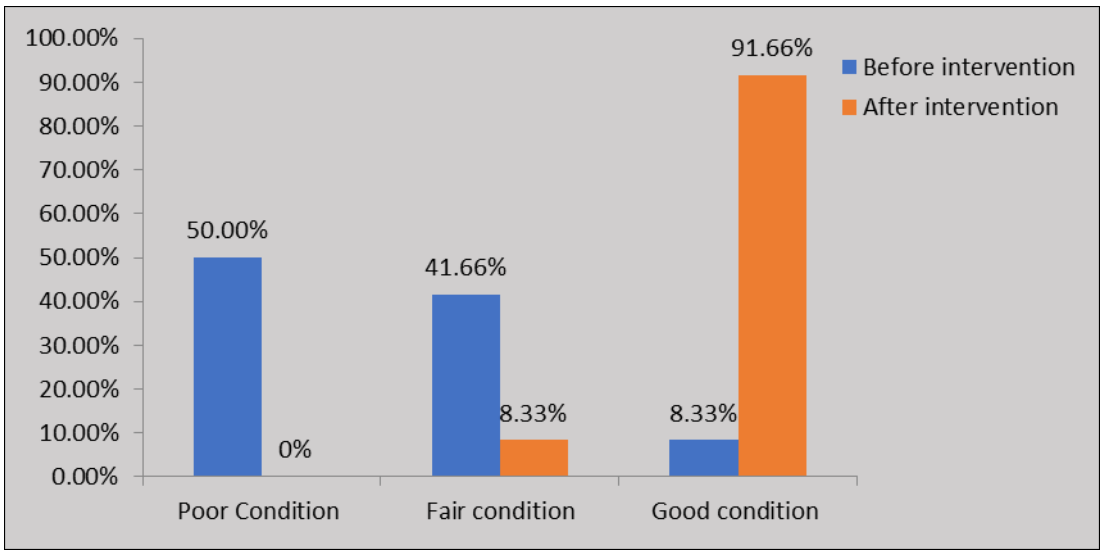

Fig 1: Column diagram showing the level of general condition of patients among experimental group before and after intervention

Before implementing the nurse-driven EM protocol, half of the patients (50%) in the experimental group were found to be in poor condition, 41.66% in fair condition, and only 8.33% in good condition as measured by the Mobility

Assessment Scale (MAS). After the intervention, remarkable improvement was observed: 91.66% of patients were categorized as having a good condition, 8.33% in fair condition, and none remained in the poor category (Figure 1).

b. Score Level of General Condition of ICU Patients in Experimental Group: The mean general condition score increased from 8.33±1.77 (mean percentage 55.55%) before the intervention to 12.25±1.48 (mean percentage 81.66%) after the intervention. The median score rose from 8.0 to 12.5, indicating a substantial enhancement in functional and physiological condition.

c. Level of General Condition of Patients in Control Group

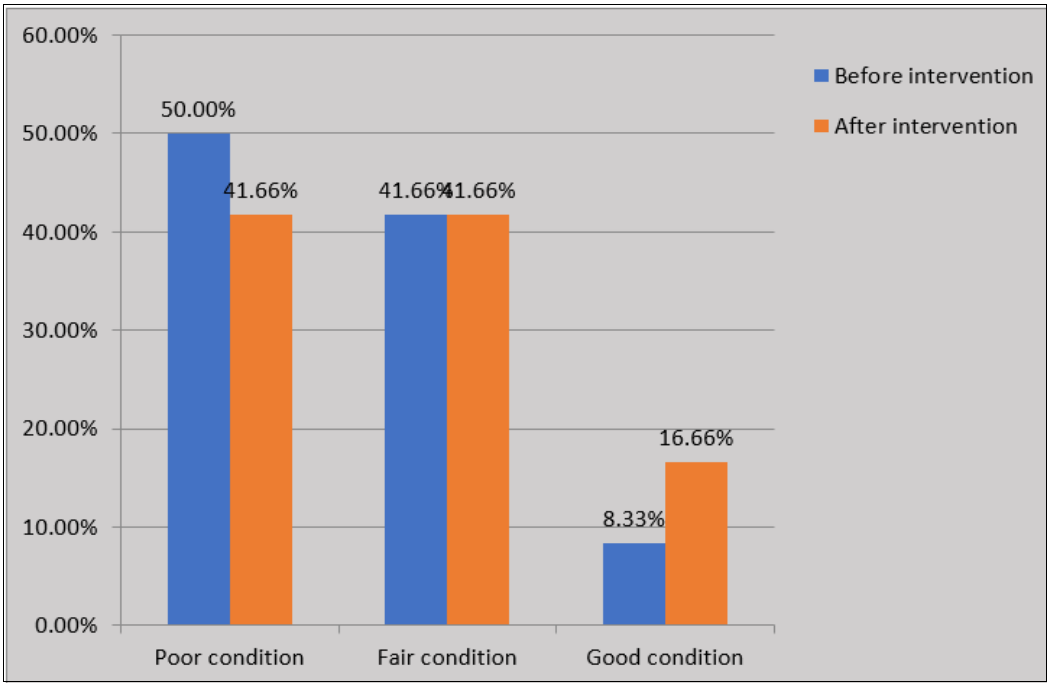

Fig 2: Column diagram showing the level of general condition of patients among control group before and after intervention

In contrast, the control group showed only marginal improvement. Before routine care, 50% of patients were in poor condition, 41.66% in fair condition, and 8.33% in good condition. After routine care, 41.66% of patients remained in poor condition, 41.66% in fair condition, and only 16.66% achieved good condition (Figure 2).

d. Score Level of General Condition of ICU Patients in Control Group: The mean score improved slightly from 9.3±1.68 (mean percentage 62%) before intervention to 10.21±1.51 (mean percentage 68.06%) after intervention, with a median change from 9.0 to 11.0.

Assess the effectiveness of nurse driven early mobility protocols

a. Effectiveness of Nurse Driven Early Mobility Protocols on General Condition of Patients among Experimental Group

Table 1: Mean, median, SD and t value of condition of the patients

S. No.	Awareness	Mean	Median	SD	Mean difference	Df	t value	p value
1.	Before intervention	8.33	8	1.77	3.92	11	8.32	0.000
2.	After intervention	12.25	12.5	1.48				

b. Effectiveness of Nurse Driven Early Mobility Protocols on General Condition of Patients among Control Group

Table 2: Mean, median, SD and t value of condition of the patients

S. No.	Awareness	Mean	Median	SD	Mean difference	Df	t value	p value
1.	Before intervention	9.3	9	1.68	0.91	11	1.38	0.12
2.	After intervention	10.21	11	1.51				

Statistical comparison using the paired t-test demonstrated that the improvement in the experimental group was highly significant (t = 8.32, p<0.001), confirming the effectiveness of the nurse-driven EM protocol in improving patients' general condition. Conversely, the control group showed no statistically significant improvement (t = 1.38, p=0.12). When comparing mean difference scores between groups, the experimental group had a greater mean change (Δ = 3.92) than the control group (Δ = 0.91). The calculated t-value (8.32) exceeded the critical value (1.96) at the 0.05 level of significance, indicating that the nurse-driven EM protocol was significantly more effective than routine care alone. The effect size (Cohen's d = 1.6) also suggested a large and clinically meaningful impact (Table 1, 2).

Regarding the overall improvement level, the transition from poor to good condition was evident almost exclusively in the experimental group, where 91.66% of patients achieved good condition post-intervention compared to only 16.66% in the control group. This demonstrated the positive impact of structured early mobilization led by nurses on functional recovery among critically ill patients. No major adverse events such as falls, line dislodgement, or hemodynamic instability occurred during the intervention sessions. Two transient episodes of mild desaturation (<1 minute) were observed but resolved spontaneously without medical intervention. Intervention adherence was 100% among eligible patients, and staff compliance exceeded 85% during all planned sessions. The recruitment rate was 75% of eligible ICU patients, and staff feedback indicated that 92% of nurses perceived the protocol as safe and feasible, while 88% agreed that it enhanced patient recovery and engagement.

In summary, the nurse-driven early mobility protocol significantly improved the general condition and physical functioning of ICU patients compared to routine care alone. The intervention was safe, feasible, and well-accepted by ICU nursing staff. These findings suggest that implementing structured nurse-led early mobilization protocols can play a vital role in improving patient outcomes, reducing complications associated with prolonged immobilization, and potentially shortening ICU stay durations.

Discussion

The present pilot study was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of a nurse-driven early mobility (EM) protocol among intensive care unit (ICU) patients at Aarogyadham Super Speciality Hospital, Dehradun. The findings revealed that patients who received nurse-driven early mobilization showed significant improvement in their overall condition compared to those who received routine care. The mean general condition score increased from 8.33±1.77 before intervention to 12.25±1.48 after intervention in the experimental group, with a highly significant difference ($t = 8.32$, $p<0.001$). In contrast, the control group exhibited only marginal improvement with no statistical significance ($t = 1.38$, $p=0.12$). These results provide early evidence that nurse-led early mobilization interventions are feasible, safe, and effective in enhancing patient recovery in critical care environments.

The findings of this study are consistent with prior research emphasizing the benefits of early mobilization in critically ill patients. Doiron *et al*. (2018) in a Cochrane systematic review reported that early intervention through mobilization or active exercise in ICU patients significantly improved physical function and reduced the duration of mechanical ventilation and ICU length of stay.[17] Similarly, Burtin *et al*. (2009) found that structured exercise programs for ICU patients enhanced short-term functional recovery and improved muscle strength without increasing adverse events.[18] In the current study, comparable improvements were observed, with 91.66% of participants in the intervention group achieving good condition post-intervention, reinforcing that early mobilization contributes to better physiological outcomes.

Furthermore, Clarissa *et al*. (2019) highlighted that early mobilization reduces ICU-acquired weakness (ICUAW), delirium, and ventilator dependency while promoting faster weaning and ambulation. [19] This aligns with the present study, which demonstrated enhanced physical performance and tolerance to mobility activities without any adverse incidents. Early mobility also has psychological benefits. Stiller (2013) noted that mobilized ICU patients experience lower levels of anxiety, depression, and delirium compared to immobilized patients. [20] Although psychological outcomes were not measured in this pilot, anecdotal observations from ICU nurses suggested improved alertness and mood among participants undergoing the mobility protocol.

Recent nurse-led interventional studies also corroborate the current findings. Ali *et al*. (2025) conducted a quasi-experimental study to promote a multidisciplinary early mobilization program for mechanically ventilated patients and reported a significant increase in nurses' knowledge and confidence regarding safe mobilization practices.[21] Similarly, AlSaeed *et al*. (2025) implemented a nurse-led early mobility protocol for post-cardiac surgery patients receiving vasoactive medications and demonstrated significant improvement in ICU mobility scores and reduced length of stay.[22] The present study parallels these outcomes, confirming that nurse-driven approaches are both feasible and impactful in resource-limited ICU settings where physiotherapy coverage may be inconsistent.

In a comparable quality improvement project, Worthington and Giannantonio (2025) reported that early ambulation after transcatheter aortic valve replacement (TAVR) reduced the time to first ambulation from 16.9 to 8.9 hours and was associated with shorter hospital stays and improved discharge outcomes.[23] The current study, though smaller in scale, demonstrated a similar pattern, showing marked improvement in physical condition scores and rapid recovery milestones after protocol implementation. These converging lines of evidence emphasize that nurse-led EM programs can be seamlessly integrated into critical care nursing workflows without compromising patient safety.

Clinical Implications

The findings of this pilot study have significant implications for critical care nursing practice. Early mobilization initiated by nurses can minimize the detrimental effects of prolonged bed rest such as muscle atrophy, joint stiffness, and ICU-acquired weakness. It promotes better pulmonary ventilation, improved circulation, enhanced neuromuscular coordination, and faster progression toward functional independence. Moreover, nurse-led initiatives empower nursing staff to take a proactive role in rehabilitation, improving professional autonomy and patient-centered care. As demonstrated by Damluji *et al*. (2013), EM can be safely implemented even in patients with invasive lines or femoral catheters when guided by appropriate safety protocols. [24] This reinforces that mobilization decisions should be based on clinical stability rather than the mere presence of medical devices.

The protocol's success in this study also highlights the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration. While physiotherapists and physicians remain key members of the ICU team, nurses are uniquely positioned to initiate and sustain early mobility because of their continuous bedside presence. Regular assessment, close monitoring, and timely intervention by nurses can enhance patient recovery and optimize ICU resource utilization. Incorporating structured EM protocols into daily care plans and nurse training modules could therefore improve overall ICU outcomes.

Feasibility and Safety

The feasibility and safety outcomes in this pilot were encouraging. No serious adverse events were reported, and adherence to the protocol was high (≥85%). Two transient desaturation episodes resolved spontaneously without clinical consequence. Similar safety findings were reported by Dean and Butcher (2012), who emphasized that EM interventions, when guided by predefined stop criteria, are both safe and well-tolerated. [25] Additionally, staff feedback in the present study indicated high acceptability, with over 90% of nurses perceiving the protocol as beneficial and manageable within existing workloads. These results confirm that nurse-led EM programs can be practically integrated into daily ICU operations without increasing staff burden or patient risk.

Limitations

Although the findings are promising, the study has certain limitations. Being a pilot study with a small sample size (n = 24), the results may not be generalizable to all ICU populations. The short duration of follow-up limited assessment of long-term functional recovery and readmission outcomes. Furthermore, randomization was limited to single-center convenience sampling, which could introduce selection bias. Despite these limitations, the study provided critical insights into the feasibility, safety, and potential impact of nurse-led EM protocols in a real-world ICU setting. Future large-scale, multicentric randomized controlled trials with longer follow-up periods and multidimensional outcomes (including quality of life, mobility indices, and ICU length of stay) are warranted to validate these preliminary findings.

Conclusion

Overall, this pilot study supports the growing body of literature that endorses early mobilization as an essential component of critical care rehabilitation. The nurse-driven EM protocol effectively improved the physical condition and recovery of ICU patients, confirming the feasibility and safety of nurse-led interventions in resource-constrained hospital environments. Integrating structured mobility programs into routine ICU care can substantially improve patient outcomes, reduce complications, and optimize healthcare resources. These findings advocate for policy-level adoption of standardized nurse-driven early mobility protocols within critical care practice across healthcare institutions.

Conflict of Interest

The authors certify that they have no involvement in any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this paper.

Funding Source

There is no funding Source for this study

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How to Cite This Article
Singh G, Santha JJ. Evaluate the effectiveness of nurse-driven early mobility protocols among ICU patients at a selected hospital of Dehradun. International Journal of Advance Research in Medical Surgical Nursing 2025; 7(2): 223-229