

WHEN WILL MY LOVED ONE BE TAKEN OFF THE VENTILATOR?

Based on the medical condition, your loved one is “weaned” from the support of a ventilator until they are able to breathe completely on their own. The team will assess the ability to keep the airway open and clear and if the patient is ready to have the tube removed (extubation). If the patient comes off the ventilator, oxygen may be given through a mask or nasal prongs.

WHAT HAPPENS IF MY LOVED ONE CANNOT COME OFF THE VENTILATOR?

A ventilator is considered a form of life support since it assists or replaces the function of the lungs. In treatable conditions, a ventilator is used temporarily until the body can heal and resume normal function.

For some patients, a ventilator may be needed indefinitely for permanent lung disease, neuromuscular disease or trauma to the spinal cord or brain. Some patients with long term ventilation live a quality of life that is acceptable to them. But, in situations where the prognosis is poor, a ventilator may only prolong suffering, diminish a person’s quality of life or prolong the dying process. The care team may then address decisions around life support and may even recommend removal of the ventilator and/or endotracheal tube to optimize end-of life care.



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Noninvasive Ventilation (NIV or BiPAP)

What is noninvasive ventilation?

When a patient cannot breathe completely on their own and needs help getting oxygen into the lungs, noninvasive ventilation (NIV) is another way to provide breathing support. The patient will wear a special face mask connected to a ventilator or breathing machine called BiPAP.

Is NIV uncomfortable?

NIV does not cause any pain, but some patients experience discomfort while wearing the mask which may cause skin irritation and bloating from swallowing air.

How long is NIV used?

The health care team will determine how long NIV is needed. NIV is not intended to be used continuously for long term breathing support as it may only prolong the dying process.

Questions?

If you have further questions about this information, please feel free to ask a member of the health care team caring for your family member or friend.

What is A Ventilator?

*Information for patients and families
in the Critical Care Unit*

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Patients in the Critical Care Unit (CrCU) often require life support measures such as a ventilator. This brochure may help answer questions you may have about a loved one on a ventilator.

It is normal to feel anxious about the procedures, tubes and equipment associated with the use of a ventilator. Learning about the ventilator will help you to understand its purpose, ease any anxiety, and help you to take an informed role in the care of your loved one.

WHAT IS A VENTILATOR?

A ventilator is a machine used to help a patient to breathe. It pushes air and oxygen into the lungs through a breathing tube called an endotracheal or tracheostomy tube.

WHEN IS A VENTILATOR USED?

A ventilator is used whenever a patient's health condition makes it hard for them to breathe on their own. The health care team works together to ensure the ventilator is not used longer than necessary.

Endotracheal Tube

WHAT DOES INTUBATION MEAN?

Intubation is a procedure by which an endotracheal tube is inserted into the mouth and down into the trachea (windpipe) when someone is unconscious or cannot breathe on their own. The endotracheal is then connected to the ventilator to provide air and oxygen to the lungs. Having an endotracheal tube is referred to as being intubated.

CAN A PERSON TALK WITH AN ENDOTRACHEAL TUBE?

Patients on a ventilator are not able to speak because the endotracheal tube goes through the vocal cords (voice box) and prevents them from moving. Once the tube is removed, patients will be able to speak again. At first, the voice may be hoarse and the patient may have a sore throat, but this will gradually go away.

HOW CAN I COMMUNICATE WITH A PERSON WHO HAS AN ENDOTRACHEAL TUBE?

Family and friends play an important role. Even though your loved one cannot talk, it is important to continue to communicate with them. Ask questions that can be answered with “yes” or “no”, with a head nod or a squeeze of the hand. Some patients may be able to write and communicate with a clip board and pen.

DOES IT HURT TO BE ON A VENTILATOR?

Patients requiring a ventilator may complain of discomfort from the endotracheal tube as it may irritate the throat. Some patients may cough or complain of being short of breath. Our goal is to make your loved one as comfortable as possible.

Tracheostomy Tube

WHAT IS A TRACHEOSTOMY TUBE?

A tracheostomy tube is a small tube placed directly into a patient's trachea through the neck. This surgical procedure called a tracheostomy is performed in the CrCU or in the operating room.

WHEN IS A TRACHEOSTOMY NEEDED?

A tracheostomy tube may be needed for patients who need a ventilator for a prolonged period of time, unable to cough effectively to clear their secretions, or may have a blocked airway.

WHAT IS SUCTIONING?

Patients who require a breathing tube occasionally need suctioning to remove secretions or mucus from the airways to help with breathing. The nurse, respiratory therapist or physiotherapist inserts a small flexible suction catheter into the breathing tube.

CAN A PERSON EAT OR DRINK ON A VENTILATOR?

Patients who are on a ventilator cannot eat or drink. Nourishment is provided through a “feeding tube” that is inserted through the nose or mouth and down into the stomach.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN WHEN THE VENTILATOR ALARM SOUNDS?

The ventilator system monitors the patient and is very sensitive to changes. An alarm sounds so the team can respond appropriately.

ARE THERE ANY COMPLICATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH A VENTILATOR?

Patients on a ventilator receive special care to prevent complications such as developing pneumonia. Keeping the head of the bed up at a 30 degree angle and providing oral care will help minimize this risk. Each day, the team will discuss the readiness to discontinue the ventilator and assess the patient's ability to breathe without help. The team will also practice proper hand washing to help eliminate the spread of microorganisms associated with infection.

Families and friends play an important role in preventing infections by washing their hands often. Please follow the signs on the door to determine if you need to wear a mask, gown, goggles and gloves.

