

Ventilator



A program of Community Hospice & Palliative Care
in collaboration with Northeast Florida hospitals

What is a Ventilator?

A ventilator is a machine that helps a person breathe. It is also called a respirator. People are placed on a ventilator when they are unable to breathe on their own. When a person is started on a ventilator:

- A tube is inserted into the windpipe
- The tube is connected to a machine that pumps air into the lungs

A person can be on a ventilator for several days with the tube inserted through the mouth and down the trachea to the lungs. If the ventilator is needed for a longer period of time, an incision is made in the neck directly into the trachea (called a tracheotomy) and the tube is inserted through the incision down to the lungs.

What are the benefits?

- Helps patients breathe during surgery
- Keeps the person alive while health care providers attempt to treat the disease that is causing the difficulty

The goal is to help people recover as quickly as possible and to get them off the ventilator at the earliest possible time. A person's age and health are contributing factors to this point. Your doctors may be able to give you a good idea about how likely the use of mechanical ventilation will lead to a successful recovery.

What are the risks?

Some of the risks of mechanical ventilation include:

- Inability to speak or eat
- Unable to ever come off, or "wean," from the ventilator
- Infections
- Collapsed lung(s)
- Lung damage
- Restraints may be required

Mechanical ventilators do not actually fix or cure diseases.

Sometimes the lungs fail because the body is dying, and using the ventilator in place of the lungs only serves to put off what is inevitable: death. In situations when the person is dying and life is prolonged, the ventilator may increase the length of time the person is uncomfortable in their final days.

Consider these Questions

Everyone has the right to make their own health care choices and inform others of their wishes in the event they cannot speak for themselves someday. These are questions to think and talk about as you decide about mechanical ventilation:

- What makes life meaningful for me?
- Under what conditions/situations would I want a ventilator used?
- Under what conditions/situations would I not want a ventilator used?
- Would I want to be on a ventilator if:
 - I have a terminal illness?
 - I have an end-stage medical condition?
 - I am unable to recognize my loved ones or know who I am?

Remember to inform your doctors, family and loved ones about your wishes and decisions regarding mechanical ventilation as part of your advance care planning.