Riverside Health

Help With Breathing (Ventilator)

For some people with chronic lung conditions or other illnesses, machines that help with breathing can be an important part of their care plan. However, for people with late-stage or terminal illnesses, these treatments will not change the progression or outcome of their illness. The information below may help you prepare for a discussion with your provider about whether these treatments are likely to benefit you.

What is a ventilator?

A ventilator is a machine that completely replaces the function of the lungs through a tube placed in a hole in the throat (tracheotomy). Less-invasive treatments like CPAP and BiPAP machines force air into the lungs using a mask. When a person is put on a ventilator, it is not always known ahead of time whether it will be needed on a short- or long-term basis.

What can it do?

Using a breathing machine for a short period of time can help people recover from an infection or manage temporary setbacks. When someone is placed on a ventilator after a sudden event like a heart attack, stroke or brain injury, providers do not always know if the person will be able to breathe on their own again. A period of time must pass before the provider can predict the outcome.

For those in the last stages of a terminal illness, a ventilator may only prolong the process of dying. In cases with a permanent loss of awareness, the ventilator will keep the person alive but will not assist in improving their condition.

What are the risks?

Medications may be used to help people relax so they do not struggle or remove the breathing tube, and this may cause them to be unable to communicate. There is also a risk of pneumonia and injury to the lungs.

How can I decide?

Thinking about your goals for treatment is the best place to start. If you have an illness, talk with your provider about your risk of not being able to breathe on your own and the likely results of using machines to help. There are treatments that will ease anxiety and discomfort when it is hard to breathe without using machines. If you are healthy, let your family know if you would want a breathing machine to keep you alive after a sudden illness or injury resulting in a permanent loss of awareness.

Although it is hard to think about, consider what condition would be "worse than death" for you and talk with the people who are closest to you about it. You can write an advance directive to communicate your choices. Be sure to periodically review it with your family and all your providers.

How do I communicate my choices?

Help your medical care providers honor your choices by discussing this information with your physician. For guidance on writing an advance directive or creating other documents to communicate your choices, contact your provider or Riverside Care Navigation at 757-856-7030.