

What is a Ventilator?

A ventilator does the work of breathing if you are too sick to breathe on your own or if you have need for long term breathing support.

- It does not cure or treat lung problems.
- The machine is often used while doctors are trying to treat a breathing problem.

A ventilator is also called mechanical ventilation.

What is it like to be on a ventilator?

- A tube is placed through the mouth down into the windpipe (trachea).
- A machine forces air into the lungs through the tube.
- Medicines are often given to make you sleepy so there is less discomfort.
- The person is often not awake or able to talk or eat.



After a few days:

- Doctors will cut back the medications that cause sleep and test to see if the person can breathe on their own.
- If so, the breathing tube is removed.

After a few weeks:

- Doctors may need to make a hole in the windpipe and insert a tube. This is called a tracheostomy.
- The person may need to move to a nursing home or have special in-home care.



What do people say a ventilator feels like when a breathing tube is placed through their mouth?

Some people are asleep while the tube is in their throat and do not remember the machine.

While some people may feel fine, some who are awake may:

- have pain from the tube or from air being pushed in the lungs.
 - feel afraid or trapped.
 - have problems swallowing or coughing.
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Does a ventilator work?

- If people are young and healthy, they may go back to being healthy.
- If people have a serious disease, they may stay very sick in the hospital or nursing home.
- The longer you are on a ventilator, the harder it becomes to breathe on your own in the future. The breathing muscles get weak.

Some people who have brain and nerve diseases may have breathing problems many years before the end of their lives. Other people may suffer brain or spinal cord injuries that require them to use a ventilator. A breathing machine may help these people.

Some people enjoy years of satisfying life while using a ventilator.

How long is a ventilator needed?

It depends.

- If a healthy person is going for surgery, they may only need the ventilator for one day.
- If a person has a serious lung infection but is healthy, they could be on the ventilator for days to weeks.
- If a person is very sick and weak, it could take months before the person is strong enough to get off the ventilator.
- Some people may be on a ventilator for the rest of their lives.
- Even with the ventilator, some people may get worse and die.



What medical problems could happen from a ventilator?

- It is easy to get lung infections that may be hard to treat.
 - The ventilator can damage the lungs.
 - If a hole has to be made to put the breathing tube into the windpipe, there could be bleeding.
 - The breathing tube can damage the vocal cords and make it hard to speak.
 - The breathing tube can damage the throat and make it hard to swallow.
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Who is most likely to be helped by a ventilator?

It depends on the type of medical problem a person has. Talk about this with your doctors.

Who is less likely to be helped by a ventilator?

Some people may not benefit from a ventilator and should discuss it with their doctor. This includes people who:

- are approaching the end of life.
 - are older.
 - have chronic illness such as heart, lung, kidney, or liver disease.
 - have dementia (memory loss) or cancer.
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What happens if I decide NOT to try a ventilator?

You will still be able to get ALL other medical treatments you and your doctors think are right for you. You can have:

- other breathing treatments.
- medications to take away shortness of breath.

Your comfort would be the primary goal. If you were to stop breathing after other treatments, you would be allowed to die naturally.

How do I decide whether or not to try a ventilator?

Think about the risks and benefits to see if it is right for you.

Some people may be willing to try a ventilator even though it may cause other medical problems.

Other people would want to try a ventilator only if their lives would be like they were before they got sick or were injured.

- Ask your doctor what your life might be like using a ventilator.

How do you feel?

- If you are unsure, you can talk with your doctors about trying a ventilator for a set period of time (a few days, one week, or a few weeks).
 - After this trial, if you are not better, the ventilator can be stopped. Your care will focus on keeping you comfortable.
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When a family member or friend is not able to make their own decisions, how do I decide whether they should try a ventilator?

It can be hard to separate our love for someone from whether or not a ventilator would help them.

It is important to ask the doctors whether a ventilator will cause more harm than good. It is important to think about:

- what the person has said they would want.
- how sick the person is.
- if the person is near the end of their life.
- the person's religious beliefs.

It will help to have ongoing discussions with:

- the person you are making decisions for (if possible),
- other friends and family, and
- the healthcare team.



How do I make my decisions about a ventilator known?

- Tell your family, friends, and your doctor about your decision.
 - Write your decision on forms you can get from your doctor.
 - Give copies of these forms to your family and doctors.
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