

Ventilators

General Information

The doctor has recommended the use of a ventilator as part of your family member's treatment. There are many reasons for the use of a ventilator, which helps your family member breathe.

The doctor or critical care nurse will tell you how the ventilator will help with your family member's condition.

What the Ventilator Does

The ventilator is a machine that helps your family member breathe and supplies extra oxygen for the lungs. This oxygen goes into the lungs through a special breathing tube (an endotracheal tube).

This tube is usually inserted through the nose or mouth and goes through the larynx (voice box) into the lungs. The tube may be uncomfortable, but it is not painful.

How Your Family Member Communicates

While the breathing tube is in place, your family member will not be able to talk. This is only temporary until the tube is taken out. Critical care nurses have experience in understanding patients who cannot talk. Other ways of communicating will be used, including writing notes and using special picture boards.

Alarms and Bells

The ventilator and other machines in the critical care unit have alarms to alert the health care providers of possible problems.

Most of the time the alarms do not signal anything serious. Please do not touch or adjust any of the machines yourself. A health care provider will respond to the alarms, check on your family member and answer your questions.

Patient Discomfort

- Your family member may be anxious while on the ventilator. If this happens, he or she may receive medicine to provide comfort and rest. The critical care nurse will check on your family member's breathing often to make sure the ventilator is helping the best it can.
- Adjustments may be made in the ventilator settings based on your family member's condition.
- Your family member's hands may be restrained. This is done to prevent him or her from accidentally removing the breathing tube.
- While the breathing tube is in place, your family member may not be able to cough very well. To help remove secretions from his or her lungs, the nurse will place a small catheter (tube) through the breathing tube and into the lungs to remove the secretions (by suction). This is necessary for recovery. This process may cause brief discomfort and your family member may be given pain medicine.

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How the Tube is Removed

As your family member's condition improves, he or she will be weaned from the ventilator. Weaning is the process of gradually removing the ventilator as your family member is able to breathe on his or her own. This process may occur over several hours or several days, depending on your family member's condition.

What You Can Do

You can contribute to your family member's care in many ways.

- When you visit, reassure and encourage him or her.
- Keep visits short — 5 or 10 minutes — to let him or her rest.
- Take care of yourself during this stressful time. Get plenty of rest, eat healthful foods, and exercise. To support your family member you must take care of yourself.
- The nurse can suggest other ways to be part of the health care team.

If you have any questions, please ask the nurses or doctors.