

# Living With Your Tracheostomy



Allina Health

## Your Tracheostomy

Your doctor made a surgical opening (stoma) in your windpipe (trachea) to help you breathe. A tracheostomy tube is placed in this opening. Most tubes have three parts.

- **Obturator:**

It is placed inside the outer cannula to insert the tracheostomy tube into the stoma. Keep it in a safe place in case the tracheostomy tube comes out.

- **Outer cannula:**

It keeps the stoma from closing. Do not take it out of the stoma.

- **Inner cannula:**

It is inserted into the outer cannula. Remove it only for cleaning.

You will receive instructions and learn how to care for your tracheostomy and incision. You should also have a family member or friend learn this information to help at home.



The obturator is placed inside the outer cannula.



The outer cannula fits into the stoma to keep it from closing.



The inner cannula fits inside the outer cannula.

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## Precautions You Need To Take

There are precautions you will need to take after your tracheostomy.

- Prevent water from entering the tracheostomy tube when you take a shower or bath. Use a shower cover. (You can buy this at a medical equipment supply store.)
- Do not swim.
- Do not use tobacco. Tobacco products include cigarettes, electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS, includes e-cigarettes and JUUL®), smokeless tobacco (dip or chew), cigars, hookahs and pipes.
- Avoid things that will irritate your airway (powders, sprays, dust, smoke).
- Do not use facial tissues to cover your tracheostomy tube. Tissues contain tiny fibers that may shed and get into your tube. Use a small piece of gauze dressing instead.
- Do not use over-the-counter antihistamines (cold medicines). Antihistamines will dry the secretions in your airway.
- Keep your tracheostomy covered at all times. This is important to:
  - keep objects out of the tracheostomy
  - warm the air you breath
  - keep the tracheostomy moist.
- You may buy a tracheostomy shield, if you wish. (You can buy this at a medical equipment supply store.)
- You may use clothing to cover the tracheostomy.
- Only use cleaning kits recommended by your doctor or nurse.

## How To Clean and Suction Your Tracheostomy

### Wash your hands

Wash your hands every time you handle the tracheostomy tube. Washing your hands well before and after will help control spreading germs.

- Run your hands under warm water.
- Use a mild soap.
- Lather well and rub your hands together for about 20 seconds.
- Rinse under warm water.
- Dry with a clean towel.

### Add humidity to prevent thick secretions

You will need more humidity (moisture in the air). When you breathe through your nose and mouth, the air is filtered, warmed and moistened. Because you breathe through the tracheostomy, you need extra moisture in the air. This is especially true in the winter when humidity is low and your house becomes dry.

You will need more humidity when your secretions become thick, dry, or form small plugs. Pink- or blood-tinged secretions may also be a sign that you need more humidity.

To add moisture, you can do the following.

- Run a warm air humidifier, a machine that adds moisture to the air. Because germs grow in a humidifier, you will need to clean it often. Follow the maker's instructions for cleaning.
- Drink a lot of liquids. This will help to thin out the secretions so you can cough them out or suction them.

- Use a disposable humidity device or humidified tracheostomy collar. (You can buy these at a medical equipment supply store.)

### Loosen thick secretions

If you cannot cough out the secretions, or if you have a mucous plug, try the following suggestions.

- Fill a bowl, pan or sink with very warm water. Place a towel over your head and lean over the water. Breathe in the steam.
- Go into the bathroom and close the door. Run a hot shower or fill the bathtub with hot water. Sit on the toilet or a chair in the bathroom. Breathe in the steam.
- Fill a teakettle with water. Heat it and breathe the steam.

### Suction your secretions

You will need to suction the secretions you are not able to cough out. Clearing your airway will make breathing easier. To suction, follow these steps:

- Connect the suction catheter with the suction catheter tubing.
- Pour sterile water or saline into a bowl. Dip the catheter tip into the water.
- Take a deep breath.
- Gently insert the catheter into the inner cannula of the tracheostomy tube. Advance it until you start to cough.
- Apply suction by covering the vent with your thumb. Apply suction only while you are removing the catheter.
- Do not apply suction for more than 10 seconds.

- Do not insert the catheter more than three times in a row. If you need more suctioning, rest for about 10 minutes before trying again.
- Take a deep breath after removing the suction catheter.
- Clear the secretions from the catheter by suctioning sterile water or saline through the catheter.
- After you are finished, throw the catheter away.

If suctioning does not clear your airway, remove and clean the inner cannula (see the next section).

### **Clean the suction machine**

- Empty the secretions from the suction bottle into the toilet.
- Wash the suction bottle and tubing with hot, soapy water.
- Clean the suction machine every day.

### **Cleaning the inner cannula of your tracheostomy**

You should clean your inner cannula and the skin around your tracheostomy twice a day. Clean more often if you have thick, dry mucus. Cleaning this often will help prevent skin irritation and an infection in your respiratory tract.

Gather all of the equipment you will need including:

- a small bowl or plastic cup
- a tracheostomy brush or pipe cleaners
- saline
- Velcro® tracheostomy ties
- 4-by-4-inch gauze dressings
- 4-by-4-inch tracheostomy dressings (with a slit).

To clean a non-disposable inner cannula:

- Remove and throw away the old tracheostomy dressing.
- Fill a bowl or cup with sterile water or saline.
- Position yourself and your supplies in front of a mirror with good lighting.
- Hold the plate of the outer cannula of the tracheostomy tube with one hand. Unlock and remove the inner cannula by aligning it with the notch area. The inner cannula should slide out easily with a downward motion toward your chest.
- Put the inner cannula in the sterile water or saline. Let it soak for about 60 seconds to loosen any secretions.
- Use the tracheostomy brush and pipe cleaners to clean the inner cannula.
- Rinse the cannula in the bowl of sterile water or saline or under warm tap water.
- Shake the cannula to get rid of extra water.
- Look through the cannula to make sure it is clean.
- Replace the inner cannula into the tracheostomy tube and lock into place.
- Wash your hands.

To change a disposable inner cannula:

- Unclip the cannula.
- Take the cannula out and throw it away.
- Put in a new cannula and clip it into place.
- Wash your hands.

If a family member or friend is helping you, have him or her wear sterile gloves. This will help prevent spreading germs.

## Stoma care

- Wash your hands well.
- Use a mild soap (with no perfume) and sterile water or saline to wash the skin around your tracheal opening. Use a washcloth or cotton-tipped swabs that will not leave fuzz, string or other material on your skin.
- If your skin is irritated, talk with your doctor about putting a thin layer of ointment (such as Bacitracin®) near your tracheostomy site.
- Put a clean slit dressing around your tube and under the ties. Be sure to hold your tube in place while changing the dressing.

## Change the tracheostomy ties

If your tracheostomy ties are soiled, you may want to change them. Use Velcro® ties.

### Velcro® ties

- Measure the tie around your neck before putting in on.
- Use a back to front direction to insert one end of the Velcro® tie through the opening in the neck plate. Do the same with the other end of the Velcro® tie.
- Slip one finger underneath the Velcro® tie to make sure it is not too tight around your neck.
- Hold the tracheostomy plate against your neck while changing the Velcro® tie.

## Emergency Information

### Replace the tracheostomy tube if it falls out

If the outer cannula of your tracheostomy tube comes out, you need to replace it as quickly as possible.

- Keep your obturator with you or somewhere it can be easily located.
- Remove the inner cannula.
- Insert the obturator into the outer cannula of the tracheostomy tube.
- Moisten the outer cannula with water (use sterile water or saline if you have it with you) and insert it into the stoma (opening in your neck) with a downward, curved motion.
- Remove the obturator quickly while holding the tracheostomy plate against your neck.
- Keep the outer cannula stable while tying it into place. If possible, have another person tie the ties.
- Reinsert the clean inner cannula and lock it into place.

If you cannot reinsert the outer cannula, call 911.

### Be prepared

- Place emergency phone numbers near each phone in your house. Include numbers for your doctor, nurse, hospital emergency room, ambulance, fire department, and any relative, friend or neighbor who can help in case of emergency.
- Talking on the phone may be difficult. Have a plan to get help in case of an emergency.

- Wear a medical alert bracelet or necklace. (You may buy them at a pharmacy.) Important information may be engraved on the back of the emblem. This is important to know in case you need rescue breathing or CPR. Breathing must be performed mouth to tracheostomy tube, not mouth to mouth. Your close family or friends may want to learn rescue breathing and CPR.

## Traveling With Your Tracheostomy

With proper planning you can travel with your tracheostomy. Take enough supplies to last during the time you plan to be away and pack a few extras.

You will need to pack the following items:

- suction catheters
- sterile water or saline
- tracheostomy tubes (same size and one size smaller)
- Velcro® ties
- portable suction machine
- oxygen (if needed)
- medicines.

If you are traveling by plane, make sure to check with the airline for any special instructions.

## When To Call Your Doctor or 911

Call your doctor if you have:

- an unusual increase in the amount of your secretions
- thick, foul-smelling secretions
- temperature of more than 101 F

- increased redness, swelling or drainage from the incision
- pain that doesn't go away with pain medicine
- mucous plugs or blood-tinged secretions from the tracheostomy tube that won't go away.

## When to call 911

Call 911 if:

- you have problems breathing
- you cannot clear your airway
- your tracheostomy falls out and you are not able to replace it.







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