

# Help with Breathing

## Advance Care Planning

Knowing your voice is heard when making decisions about health care is important. Advance Care Planning is the process of preparing for a time when you may not be able to make your own medical decisions. The best time to make these decisions is when you are able to make your own choices.

## Health Care Agent

Discussing and sharing your wishes with your loved ones, health care team and health care agent are important. A health care agent makes health care decisions based on your wishes if you are unable to communicate.

## Health Care Directive

By writing a Health Care Directive, you can make your voice heard so your wishes are followed. A Health Care Directive is a written plan outlining your values and priorities for your future medical treatment.

## What does help with breathing mean?

A physical condition or illness may make breathing on your own difficult, painful or impossible. If you have a breathing problem, choices are available to help including:

- Taking medicine
- Inhaling oxygen through a tube in your nose or mask over your mouth
- Using a bi-level positive airway pressure (BiPAP) machine that can help you breathe
- Being put on a ventilator, a machine that breathes for you

Deciding while you are able to make your own choices if you would want help with your breathing is important in advance care planning. The following information can help you decide if you would want help with your breathing.

## How does a ventilator work?

A ventilator is a machine that pushes a mixture of air and oxygen in and out of your lungs to breathe for you. The machine connects to a tube that goes through your mouth and down your windpipe at the back of your throat.

Inserting this tube down your windpipe is called intubation. When the tube is in place, you cannot talk or swallow. You will receive medicine to help stay calm when the tube is in place.

Being on a ventilator requires care in the Intensive Care Unit at the hospital.

## How does a BiPAP machine work?

A BiPAP machine pushes a mixture of air and oxygen into your lungs through a tight-fitting mask over your mouth. The mask may be uncomfortable and make talking difficult. You may receive medicine to help stay calm when wearing the mask.

Because you do not have a tube guiding the oxygen directly to your windpipe, sometimes the oxygen can go into your stomach. Oxygen in your stomach can cause discomfort.

## How effective is a ventilator or BiPAP?

- A ventilator and BiPAP work best if you:
  - » Have a breathing problem that can be cured
  - » Need help with breathing for a short time while recovering from surgery or a sudden illness
- A ventilator or BiPAP machine will not work as well if you:
  - » Illness cannot be cured
  - » Body is not able to tolerate the high-pressure flow of the oxygen in and out of your lungs

### **Will a ventilator or BiPAP work for me?**

Talk to your clinician about how well a ventilator or BiPAP would work for you. If you choose to have a machine help you breathe, your clinician will advise you about which option will likely work best for you.

### **What if I do not want a ventilator or BiPAP?**

If you are not able to breathe on your own and decide you do not want a ventilator or to use a BiPAP machine, you will die naturally. If this is your choice, you will still get other medical care you need. Other treatments can keep you comfortable, manage pain, and control symptoms so you can live as well and as long as is possible for your health status.

### **How do I decide what is best for me?**

Talk with your clinician, loved ones, and spiritual advisor about your medical and personal goals and values. Consider the quality of life you may have using the machines. Ask yourself what you would want to do if:

- The ventilator or BiPAP machine does not work for you
- Your health worsens
- You can no longer make your own decisions

### **What should I do after I decide?**

Let loved ones know your decision about help with breathing so they can honor your choice. Be sure to document your choice about help with breathing in a Health Care Directive.

Also talk about your decision with your doctor and health care team. Your health care provider may recommend medical orders called POLST (Provider Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment) that document your choice about help with breathing and other health care wishes.

A POLST provides specific instructions for emergency medical responders and other health care providers. A POLST form is not a replacement for a Health Care Directive and does not name a health care agent.

Remember, your goals, values and priorities may change. Your health status may change, too. Revisit your decision about help with breathing regularly as you get older or if your health changes.

