Honoring Choices® VIRGINIA

Planning in Advance for Future Health Care Choices

HELP WITH BREATHING

You may develop a physical condition or illness that makes breathing on your own difficult, painful, or impossible. If you need help with breathing, the options that can help include:

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

The following information explains these options. The time to make these choices is when you feel well and have time to think about what you need to live well. Talk to your doctor and loved ones about what is important to you.

What is a ventilator (breathing machine)?

This machine pushes air and oxygen into your lungs to help you breathe. It is hooked to a tube that goes through your mouth into your throat (windpipe). You cannot speak or swallow when the tube is in. You may need medicine to help you stay calm and restraints to stop you from pulling the tube. At first you will need to be in the ICU on the breathing machine. After a few weeks, a surgery may be required to put a tube in your neck called a tracheostomy (or "trach") and you will need a plan for longer use of the machine.

What is bi-level positive air pressure (BiPAP)?

BiPAP pushes oxygen into your lungs through a tight-fitting mask over your nose and mouth. You can try a BiPAP for the short-term if you do not want to be on a ventilator. The tight-fitting mask might hurt or push on your skin. Air can go into your belly and cause pain. It may be hard to talk or eat. You may need medicine to help you stay calm when wearing the mask.

Adapted from materials developed by Respecting Choices®. Updated 2025

Would a ventilator or BiPAP work for me?

A ventilator or BiPAP will work best if:

- Your breathing problem can be fixed.
- You are using either device for a short time to get better after surgery or sudden illness.

A ventilator or BiPAP will not work as well if:

- You have an illness that cannot be cured.
- You are not able to withstand the air pressure required to move oxygen in and out of your lungs.

Your health care provider can help you decide which option would work best for you.

How do I decide what is best for me?

Talk with your health care provider and your loved ones about what you want and what is important to you. Consider the quality of life you may have using or not using the machines. Ask yourself what you want if:

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

What should I do after I decide?

Discuss your decision with your health care provider and your health care agent. We can help you make a plan that will follow your wishes. And remember that your decision can change. Revisit your decision regularly as you get older or your health changes.