

Breathing Support

Advance Care Planning

There may be times during your cancer treatment when it is hard to breathe or you may not be able to breathe on your own. If this happens, your health care team will work with you to decide the best treatment plan for you.

Talk with your health care team and learn more about breathing support before you need it.

- Learn the facts about each treatment.
- Understand the benefits and risks and how they apply to you.
- Talk with your health care team and ask any questions.
- Talk with the people who you trust and care about you.

Causes

There can be many reasons for breathing problems. Some of the more common reasons for patients with cancer are:

- Not getting enough oxygen or low blood oxygen levels. This may happen for many reasons.
- Cancer of the lung or cancer that has spread to the lung
- Fluid around the heart or lungs
- Lung infections or pneumonia
- The heart is weak and cannot pump normally (heart failure)
- Inflammation of the lungs due to treatment or medicines
- Blood clots in the lung
- Asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- Generalized weakness which can affect the breathing muscles
- Anything that causes the abdomen to push up on the diaphragm, such as fluid or a tumor. When this happens, the lungs have less room to expand when breathing.

Treatment

Depending on the reason for your breathing problem and your goals of care, your doctor will work with you to choose the best treatment. Treatments may include:

- Oxygen for low blood oxygen levels
- Antibiotics for pneumonia
- Medicines or procedures to help remove extra fluid
- Steroids for inflammation
- Breathing treatments for asthma or COPD
- Exercise and therapy for weak muscles
- Anticoagulants for blood clots

- Chemotherapy, radiation treatment, or surgery for a tumor

Breathing Support

Breathing support is a way to give your body more oxygen. You may need breathing support if you are not able to take in enough oxygen by breathing on your own. There are several types of breathing support. The best type for you depends on how much oxygen you need. Your doctor will help you decide which type is best for you.

These simple types of breathing support can be given at home or in the hospital:

- Nasal tube (tubes placed in your nose) that delivers oxygen
- A face mask that covers your nose and mouth that delivers oxygen

If you need higher amounts of oxygen, you may need another type of oxygen support. These types are described below.

High-Flow Oxygen

This type of oxygen support involves using a special nasal tube. If simple nasal tubes do not meet your oxygen needs, high-flow oxygen may be an option. You cannot receive this type of oxygen at home. **You will need to stay in the hospital as long as you need this treatment.**

Non-Invasive Ventilation With Bi-PAP or C-PAP

This type of oxygen support is delivered by a mechanical ventilator (breathing machine). Oxygen is pushed through a tightly fitted face mask. This type of oxygen support uses pressure to push oxygen into the lungs. You may need to wear the face mask at all times. This can make it hard to eat and talk.

Intubation and Mechanical Ventilation

Usually, this type of oxygen support is for patients who have respiratory failure and cannot breathe on their own. Intubation means placing a tube into the airway (or trachea) through the nose or mouth. A ventilator or breathing machine pushes oxygen through the tube into the lungs.

Patients who receive this type of oxygen are usually in the intensive care unit. If you need this type of oxygen support for a long time, a more permanent kind of tube (tracheostomy tube) is surgically placed in the airway.

If you are intubated, you will not be able to speak and will need to communicate in other ways, such as by writing or using sign language. Your doctor may give you medicine to make you less anxious. The medicine may make you sleepy and make it hard to communicate with others.

Risks of intubation and mechanical ventilation include:

- Infection
- Lung damage
- A collapsed lung

A breathing machine does not treat disease, but helps you breathe while your health care team tries to improve your physical condition. The goal is to have you breathe on your own as soon as possible. If your lungs do not get strong enough, you may need oxygen support from the

ventilator permanently. At this stage, you and your health care team may decide to stop the ventilator and focus on making you comfortable.

Your Treatment Decisions

When you think of breathing treatments, it is important to know the purpose of each type of treatment. Ask your doctor:

- Will it fix the cause of the problem?
- What are the side effects and risks of each treatment?

Your treatment plan may depend on the answers to these questions. Your values and goals of care may also affect your decision. Some patients may choose to try a treatment, and some patients decide breathing treatments are not right for them. Comfort care may be the main goal of care at this time.

Talk with your doctor or nurse about any questions or concerns you have.

Resources

Learn more about advance care planning online at:

www.MDAnderson.org/AdvanceCarePlanning.

Ask your social work counselor for a copy of the Patient Education workbook, **Advance Care Planning**.