

Preventing Ventilator-Associated Infections

Ventilators are used at healthcare facilities across the country. They help patients when they cannot breathe on their own.

"This requires that a tube be inserted into your wind pipe or sometimes into your neck, a tracheostomy, that will be connected to a ventilator. During the time that you are using a ventilator, that machine will breathe for you. It's going to be scary, I'm sure, because you are not breathing normally, you are breathing through a tube or something that feels different. But rest assured, that ventilator will do its job."

While ventilators help people breathe, their use can also put you at risk for infection.

"Despite our best efforts, ventilator-associated infections can happen. These infections are caused in the lungs, where maybe secretions or other matter actually contaminates the patient's lungs and it can cause an infection."

One of the things that can prevent infection from occurring during ventilator use is good care of your mouth, or oral care.

"You'll notice that every few hours a nurse or respiratory therapist will be entering the room to care for oral care. So just as we practice things like using mouth wash or tooth paste and tooth brush at home, we'll do something similar and stronger in the health care setting to reduce your risk for infection."

Health care providers must also ensure each piece of medical equipment used with the ventilator is used correctly.

"We use what's called a closed system to reduce the risk of outside contamination that might cause infection. All of the components that we use that start with the tube in the patient's throat all the way through the tubing that's connected to the machine are disposable. Therefore, they'll only be used on one patient and are routinely changed to reduce the risk of infection."

The position of the patient's bed also helps.

"It's really important to keep the head of the bed elevated when you have a ventilator being used to reduce the risk for unnecessary secretions entering the lungs and causing infection."

Family members or loved ones visiting you in the hospital have a very important responsibility as well.

"They're going to want to touch you and help be involved in your care. We want that, too. But it's also important to remember that anytime they touch you or any piece of equipment or anything that is used to provide care for you, it needs to be done with clean hands. So we will be reminding them, just like we as health care workers, cleanse and wash our hands. We want them to do the same thing."