
Removing Life Support

A time may come when the only outcome from the therapies that prolong life is the prolonging of suffering, with no chance of meaningful recovery. At that point, the dying person may be able to make the decision to stop treatment. When that is not possible, the person's legally authorized representative (called a healthcare agent) has the right to decide whether to withdraw treatment. If you are the person's legal representative, and the therapies that are prolonging life are causing unbearable suffering, you may choose to talk with the healthcare provider and ask that life support be removed. If you do, the healthcare team will keep the dying person comfortable until their life ends. The hospice team will also be able to provide support and symptomatic care to both your loved one, you, and your family.



Removing life support is a hard choice to make. Remember, your decision is not the cause of your loved one's death. The disease or injury is.

Removing the ventilator

Taking the breathing tube out relieves the discomfort it may have caused. Once off the machine, a patient may stop breathing. However, in some cases, a patient may continue to breathe on their own.

Stopping food and fluids

When the feeding tube is removed, death often follows in a few days. It's not painful. Most people go into a deep sleep before dying. Withholding food can be a hard decision. But a person very near death is not going to feel hunger, and feeding them may actually increase their discomfort.

Removing IV lines

IV (intravenous) lines can be used to provide fluids and medicines. Ask the staff if you have any questions about the result of stopping this type of life support. Without antibiotics, for instance, an infection might cause death.

How you may feel

It's normal to feel a burden if you have to decide whether to remove life support. You may also feel guilty, sad, or afraid. Know that you have no power over death itself. You can only try to make the treatment choices your loved one would have made. Allow the medical team to help you make the decision, but don't rush. If you feel confused or pressured, talk privately with a trusted family member who knows your loved one well. Or talk with a counselor or a trusted member of your faith community before making the final decision.