

## Ventilator Dependency and Respiratory Care Life on a Ventilator- The Reality

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Ventilator dependency is a topic that many avoid until life circumstances dictate the inevitable. Ventilator dependency occurs when the body can no longer adequately ventilate and/or oxygenate without assistance. The body's natural drive to breathe becomes affected, thus hindering air exchange. This may occur due to a disease process, infection, trauma, a neurological condition, etc. The respiratory system becomes inadequate resulting in hypoxemia and hypercapnia. When the body's natural process fails, life takes on a new meaning and respiratory intervention becomes the core needed to survive. Accepting present circumstances, living and existing become a combination that encircles a person on life support.

Life on a ventilator adds new meaning to independence as it becomes nonexistent. Once a person is on life support, the joys of talking, communicating, eating, drinking, walking and planning activities become limited options as the ability to be self-sufficient no longer exists. Many live in long-term care facilities so that basic needs are met and Respiratory intervention is close at hand, while others live at home relying on family, friends or support services. Respiratory Care, education, compassion and emotional support is needed to balance the changes presented. Keep in mind that basic needs are generally taken for granted, however become unattainable dreams when dependent on a ventilator. It is imperative to help balance the needs observed so that change can be accepted. There are many who can successfully vocalize and swallow food/water with a valve connected inline through the ventilator, however the transition to tolerating an inline valve may be unattainable. It's a process that includes relearning how to chew and swallow without aspirating. Eating and drinking must be modified to prevent aspiration which can cause decompensation of the respiratory system. This can be a very difficult process for many, especially if they are weakened due to the condition.

Basic activities of daily living become a struggle to fulfill as life on a ventilator reveals a surprising reality. As a modified path opens doors to possibilities, the ability to move forward may be futile, however positive reinforcement and encouragement must be included in the daily plan of care. Dependence on a machine to live, emotional support by family/friends and Respiratory Therapy intervention can be the pathway to fulfilling standards needed to give life meaning. Everyone matters in this world regardless of physical, health or financial limitations. It is up to us as a society to give the support needed when someone's world becomes enclosed by a machine. Remember that compassionate respiratory care is the core for quality of life.

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