

Respiratory Devices for ALS

Your ALS clinic or medical team will monitor your breathing, provide respiratory support, and prescribe the right respiratory devices at the right time. Using respiratory devices can improve your quality of life and help you live longer.

Your neurologist will prescribe your devices through a durable medical equipment (DME) company that will process the order through your insurance, deliver the respiratory equipment (and supplies), and train you how to use it.

Below you will find the most common types of respiratory devices that help people living with ALS. Medicare, Medicaid, and most private insurance plans should cover most, if not all, of the expenses. If you face out-of-pocket costs that you cannot afford, speak with your DME provider and local ALS Network care manager about financial assistance options.



A **bilevel** (BiPAP) is a small breathing machine that delivers pressurized air through a face mask to assist with both inhaling and exhaling, primarily during sleep. Your neurologist must submit your pulmonary function test results and documentation that demonstrate you need breathing support during sleep.

A **portable ventilator** can help you breathe either noninvasively (via a mask) or invasively (via a trach). It has a bilevel mode for sleeping and daytime breathing support. Portable ventilators have internal batteries and typically weigh under 12 pounds and come with travel bags that can hook onto the backs of wheelchairs.

A **cough assist machine** helps your breathing by clearing phlegm and fluid-like secretions from your lungs. The cough assist machine simulates a natural cough by applying positive pressure to inflate your lungs before using a vacuum-like suction to pull everything up. Once secretions are in your mouth, you can use a suction machine to clear everything out.

A **suction machine** is a device with a wand, similar to the one at the dentist's office, that uses suction to remove excess mucus and saliva from your mouth when your mouth and throat muscles become weaker and your swallowing may be impaired. The suction machine has an internal battery, so you can take it wherever needed.

Masks and Interfaces

Masks and interfaces will arrive when your bilevel machine or portable ventilator is delivered. A respiratory therapist from the DME company will bring a variety of mask options and recommend the one that will be the most appropriate for you. This may depend on how you breathe at night and how well the different masks fit. Cough assist machines will arrive with the appropriate mask included.

Noninvasive Ventilation

Noninvasive ventilation (NIV) can provide helpful breathing support through a mask that you can put on and take off as needed. Studies have shown that noninvasive ventilation can alleviate respiratory symptoms, improve quality of life, and help you live longer. It is one of the most effective interventions available for people living with ALS. You can receive noninvasive ventilation either through a bilevel machine or a portable ventilator.

Invasive Mechanical Ventilation

When noninvasive ventilation no longer provides enough breathing support, invasive mechanical ventilation will be discussed as a way to extend your life. This requires tracheostomy surgery, which creates a circular hole in your windpipe at the base of your neck where the ventilator tube will connect. After that, the portable ventilator will breathe for you.

Going on invasive mechanical ventilation means that you will need to be connected to your ventilator full-time and will need 24/7 care. This can help you live longer, but it can also come at a cost to you and your family. It does not slow down disease progression or reverse ALS.

Getting a tracheotomy is a very personal decision. Talk with your ALS clinic or medical team about the advantages and disadvantages of mechanical ventilation, and discuss this very important decision with your family.

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