

Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS) A Guide for Family and Friends

Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS) is a form of lung failure. This lung failure can result from several problems such as infection, shock and trauma. Some problems linked with ARDS are:

- Pneumonia
- Fractures
- Burns
- Head injuries
- Blood transfusions
- Organ transplants
- Trauma

In ARDS, the lungs become “leaky”. Air sacs in the lungs become filled with fluid. The extra fluid makes the lungs become “stiff”. Breathing and oxygen transfer becomes harder.

Care of the Patient with ARDS

Your family member or friend will be in an intensive care unit (ICU). The patient will be watched closely 24 hours a day by nurses, doctors, and respiratory therapists.

Breathing Tube

The patient will have a breathing tube placed either in their mouth or the nose. This tube goes down the throat, past the vocal cords, and into the large airways of the lungs. The breathing tube (or ET tube) is connected to a breathing machine by long hoses.

Ventilator or Breathing Machine

This machine pushes air with oxygen in and out of the lungs. It is needed to keep the lungs and its air sacs open. This helps oxygen to get into the blood and carbon dioxide to get out.

The breathing machine also takes over the work of breathing so the lungs can rest and have time to heal.

While the breathing tube is in place, it will be cleaned out when mucus builds up. To do this, a small tube is put into the breathing tube and the mucus is sucked out. This is called suctioning. You may be asked to leave the bedside when this is done.

Having a breathing tube in place can be scary. The patient will not be able to talk. They may feel short of breath, even though they are getting plenty of air. We treat anxiety with sedatives when needed. Patients at times may try to pull the breathing tube out. The breathing machine is needed. Therefore, the staff may need to restrain the patient’s hands with soft restraints for their own safety.

Medicines

Sometimes the patient wants to breathe faster than the machine. This fast breathing makes it hard to rest the lungs. Sometimes the doctors use a drug called a paralytic to keep the patient from breathing too much. If this drug is used, the patient will not be able to move or open their eyes. Once the drug is stopped, the patient will be able to move and open their eyes again. For comfort, other drugs, such as sedatives and pain medicines are given when a patient is on a breathing machine. Members of the health care team are always here to answer any of your questions.

IV Lines

Fluids, drugs, and nutrition are given into the blood through a thin plastic tube called an IV. It is common for a patient to have many IV lines. Most IV lines are on pumps that report the exact amount the patient receives each hour. Ask the nurse any questions you may have about IV's.

How can I make my visit helpful?

Because your family member or friend cannot meet their basic need for oxygen, they need to depend on others and on equipment to survive. This can cause a great feeling of loss of control and increased feelings of dependency. It is helpful for you and staff to talk to the patient. Tell them that they are being taken good care of and being watched.

When you come to visit, you may hold the patient's hand and talk to the patient. The patient may or may not be able to respond to you because of the medicines. We assume the patient can hear what is being said. A familiar voice and touch are calming.

Summary

Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome can be a serious problem seen with many diseases and injuries. Many recent advances have been made in the treatment of ARDS. Because of our experienced staff and advanced technology, we can provide excellent care.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 4/2023 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#4232.