

Tracheostomy

What is the trachea?

The trachea, or windpipe, is a passage in the neck through which we breathe. Air passes down through the nose and mouth into the trachea and then into the lungs. The trachea lies just in front of the food tube, or esophagus.

When is surgery done?

(1) It is performed when a patient has been on a breathing machine, or is anticipated being on a breathing machine for a long time. The tracheostomy facilitates good pulmonary hygiene, allowing nurses and staff to clean out the lungs. It is easier to tolerate than a tube down the throat and often will help a patient get off the breathing machine.

(2) It is done to allow the patient to breathe better after surgery on the throat when significant swelling is expected.

(3) Severely obese individuals with severe obstructive sleep apnea.

The tracheostomy may be temporary or permanent, depending on the patient's breathing status.

What is done?

An incision is made in the lower part of the neck, and a cut is made in the trachea/windpipe itself. A plastic tube is inserted through this opening, connecting the airway directly to the outside air or breathing machine.

What are the risks or alternatives?

The alternative to a tracheostomy is to remain with a tube down the throat connected to the breathing machine.

(1) There will be scar in the neck from the incision.

(2) Bleeding and infection are always possible complications, although the chances are low.

(3) Pneumothorax or small risk of injury to the lungs.

(4) The tracheostomy tube can become dislodged.

(5) If the tracheostomy is permanent or long term, it will require continual care, including regular irrigation through the tube with a small amount of saline solution and suctioning with a catheter. Humidity is necessary to prevent drying out of the lining of the trachea. Persons with a tracheostomy tube in place may find it more difficult to swallow. They may swallow food or spit down the wrong tube (i.e., into the airway). This could lead to a lung infection, or pneumonia.