Breathe Easy
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Getting a full breath for an ALS patient can sometimes be difficult. Weak muscles, congestion, saliva, and positioning often make a deep breath a real challenge. If you are being seen at an ALS clinic, most likely they are checking your lung capacity at every visit. This Pulmonary Function test is known as your VC (vital capacity). That is your ability to take in air and also to let it out. There are many helpful tools to make your breathing easier and fuller.

BIPAP
Weakness, along with your positioning and general health, can make simple chest expansion difficult. A BIPAP (Bilevel Positive Airway Pressure) machine may be prescribed for use every night and during daytime nap periods. Like for sleep apnea, this machine will help you get a better night’s sleep and more energy. A “face mask” delivers pressured air from the BIPAP which is delivered in a variety of ways. Or, you may start out simply with a nose cover mask. However, if you sleep with your mouth open, you will lose air and may need to try a chin strap to keep your mouth closed. A nose/mouth mask may work better for you since it covers both the inhale/exhale openings and less air will escape, delivering more to the lungs. Making the face mask too tight will cause redness and skin problems. Do not settle on just a generic mask —ask to be fitted as everyone’s face shape is very different. Respironics is one company whose face masks seem to get the best patient ratings. Check out this Website for their selection, including the newest—Total Face. It is a helmet shield, which will not obstruct your view.

ASPIRATION
Poor bulbar (swallowing) muscles often cause patients to “aspirate” saliva, food, or liquids into the lungs. Failure to remove this can lead to a bacterial infection and possible pneumonia which may require a hospitalization. There are a variety of ways to keep lungs clear. Good chest physical therapy by a respiratory therapist can help mobilize mucus and keep it out of the lungs, along with a demonstration of air-stacking exercises. Use of a suction machine to clear saliva or secretions is required. Don’t forget to ask for a Yankeur tip catheter, it is easier to use in the mouth. Your physician may also order medication that can help with excess saliva.

COUGH ASSIST
Many physicians now recommend the J.H. Emerson Cough Assist or Exsufflator. This product is often ordered prior to or at the same time as the BIPAP. The Cough Assist is a prescription item that is covered by Medicare and Medicaid. Studies have shown prolonged survival and a delayed need for tracheotomy by over a year with its use. J.H. Emerson Company is in Cambridge, Mass; call (800) 252-1414 to locate the nearest supplier.

GET YOUR FLU SHOT
Influenza time is near. Don’t forget as the summer draws to an end to research where and when you can get your flu shot. You can also check with MDA or ALSA in your area. They may offer them free to patients, but make sure those caring for you get one too.