

Patient information from BMJ

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Nasopharyngeal airway (breathing tube in the nose)

What is a nasopharyngeal airway?

A nasopharyngeal airway is a tube placed through the nose to help you breathe.

It is one of several procedures that can help people who are having trouble breathing normally. A nasopharyngeal airway is used until you can safely breathe again on your own. It allows doctors to give you oxygen that will reach your lungs via the tube.

Why might I need a nasopharyngeal airway?

A nasopharyngeal airway is used when someone is awake or partly awake and struggling to breathe. It's often used when other methods to support breathing might be more difficult. This is because, when someone is awake, it is easier to place a breathing tube through their nose than through their mouth because of their gag reflex.

What will happen during the procedure?

Nasopharyngeal airways are normally only inserted in emergency situations when you are having trouble breathing.

A doctor will first assess you. If they are concerned about your breathing, they will:

- move your head and chin gently back into a position that opens the airway while you're lying flat
- check your breathing
- give you oxygen via a breathing mask.

If you are still struggling to breathe, but you are awake or partly awake, your doctor will insert a nasopharyngeal airway by:

- easing a flexible, lubricated tube into your nostril until it is in position
- replacing the oxygen mask so oxygen passes through the tube in your nose and into your lungs.

What are the risks with a nasopharyngeal airway?

All emergency breathing procedures carry risks. The main risk with a nasopharyngeal airway is that the tube can damage the inside of the nose and cause bleeding. This is not usually serious.

What can I expect afterwards?

The nasopharyngeal airway is kept in place until you can safely breathe by yourself. After it is removed, your doctor will keep a close eye on you to check that your breathing is now steady and regular. You can be given more oxygen if you need it.

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