

Respiratory Therapist

Respiratory Therapists care for patients who have trouble breathing—for example, from a chronic respiratory disease, such as asthma or emphysema. Their patients range from premature infants with undeveloped lungs to elderly patients who have diseased lungs. They also provide emergency care to patients suffering from heart attacks, drowning, or shock.

Respiratory Therapists typically do the following:

- Interview and examine patients with breathing or cardiopulmonary disorders
- Consult with physicians to develop patient treatment plans
- Perform diagnostic tests, such as measuring lung capacity
- Treat patients by using a variety of methods, including chest physiotherapy and aerosol medications
- Monitor and record patients' progress
- Teach patients how to take medications and use equipment, such as ventilators

Respiratory Therapists use various tests to evaluate patients. For example, Therapists test lung capacity by having patients breathe into an instrument that measures the volume and flow of oxygen when they inhale and exhale. Respiratory Therapists also may take blood samples and use a blood gas analyzer to test oxygen and carbon dioxide levels.

Respiratory Therapists perform chest physiotherapy on patients to remove mucus from their lungs and make it easier for them to breathe. Removing mucus is necessary for patients suffering from lung diseases, such as cystic fibrosis, and involves the therapist vibrating the patient's rib cage, often by tapping the patient's chest and encouraging him or her to cough.

Respiratory Therapists may connect patients who cannot breathe on their own to ventilators that deliver oxygen to the lungs. Therapists insert a tube in the patient's windpipe (trachea) and connect the tube to ventilator equipment. They set up and monitor the equipment to ensure that the patient is receiving the correct amount of oxygen at the correct rate.

Respiratory Therapists who work in home care teach patients and their families to use ventilators and other life-support systems in their homes. During these visits, they may inspect and clean equipment, check the home for environmental hazards, and ensure that patients know how to use their medications. Therapists also make emergency home visits when necessary.

In some hospitals, Respiratory Therapists are involved in related areas, such as diagnosing breathing problems for people with sleep apnea and counseling people on how to stop smoking.

Work Environment

Most Respiratory Therapists work full time. Because they may work in medical facilities, such as hospitals that are always open, some may work evening, night, or weekend hours.

Watch a video about being a Respiratory Therapist

Top Local Employers: Soliant Health, Med Travelers, Cross Country Healthcare, Stanford Children's Health

Median Pay

\$100,359

Job Growth (2020-2025)

13%

Education and Training

Respiratory Therapists typically need an associate degree, but some have bachelor's degrees. Respiratory Therapists are licensed in all states except Alaska; requirements vary by state.

Local Education:

Foothill College

Skyline College

For More Information:

Bureau of Labor Statistics

American Association for Respiratory Care