Respiratory Therapist

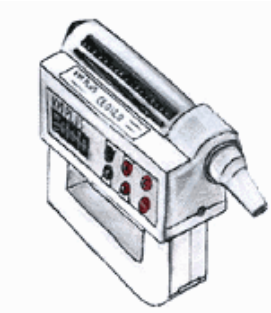
A respiratory therapist is someone who helps people who are having trouble breathing. This specialist works together with the doctors and nurses to find out the source of the patient's problem. The respiratory therapist can administer many types of lung function tests to help diagnose the patient's disease.

Career Path

There are two types of respiratory therapists. You can become a Certified Respiratory Therapist (CRT) after two years of college study and a Registered Respiratory Therapist (RRT) with four years in college. Both types of degrees require that you pass a test.

Respiratory therapists play an important role in the treatment of patients with asthma. A young person with asthma is likely to see a respiratory therapist at least once a year. The therapist performs tests on the patient to see how well their lungs are working and spends time showing the patient how to perform their own lung function tests at home. The respiratory therapist may also check the levels of oxygen, carbon dioxide and other gasses in the patient's breath and blood.

One very important piece of equipment used by respiratory therapists is the "spirometer". This device tells the therapist the patient's lung capacity or how much air the patient can exhale in one breath. It will also record how quickly the patient can blow air out of the lungs. The data collected from the spirometer is used to make two types of graphs. These graphs tell the therapist and the doctor if the patient's lungs are working normally.



Technology Spotlight

A quick and easy way to measure your lung capacity is outlined below:

1. **Blow up a round balloon and let out the air several times.**
2. **When the balloon's rubber is stretched out enough so that you can blow into it easily, take a big breath and blow all your air into the balloon.**
3. **Using a tape measure, measure around the balloon at its widest point.**
4. **Try it again and see if your second measurement is the same as the first.**

Why might there be a difference between one breath and the next?

To learn more about your lung capacity, click on "Managing Asthma" at www.clevelandclinic.org/civiceducation/healthCARE.asp. Lesson 5 of this unit (starting on page 13) tells you how to make a spirometer from a plastic bottle and some tubing!