# Tracheotomy Encyclopedia Article

## Tracheotomy

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# Contents

Tracheotomy Encyclopedia Article.....1

Contents.....2

Tracheotomy.....3

# Tracheotomy

A tracheotomy is a life-saving surgical procedure in which an opening is made in a patient's windpipe (trachea) and tube is inserted into the opening in the throat to allow breathing to continue in the event of airway obstruction. Once the emergency situation passes, the tube can be removed and the opening closed.

The first tracheotomy was performed in 1825 by French physician Pierre Bretonneau (1778-1862) on a four-year-old girl whose throat had become obstructed with the scar tissue that forms in the throats of diphtheria victims. Bretonneau had attempted two tracheotomies previously and failed, but his determination, skill, and dexterity finally paid off, saving the girl's life. Bretonneau, the son of a surgeon, became a physician at the hospital in Tours. Practicing medicine among the poor, he was the first to study such diseases as typhoid fever and diphtheria in detail and was the first to use the term "diphtheria." Also a skilled craftsman, Bretonneau made hydraulic hammers, barometers, and thermometers.

Tracheotomies can be used for people who need long-term artificial airway support--such as poliomyelitis victims or people paralyzed from the neck down, people with respiratory infections, cancer, airway burns, upper airway obstruction, and even extreme cases of sleep apnea.