
Who Needs Home Oxygen Therapy?

Oxygen is a medication that must be prescribed by your physician for a condition called hypoxemia (low blood levels of oxygen). Hypoxemia can occur in COPD, emphysema, chronic bronchitis, occupational lung disease, lung cancer, cystic fibrosis, or congestive heart failure. A blood test will indicate what your oxygen level is and help tailor your prescription to what you need.

You may need oxygen for only a short time after your hospital discharge if you have a temporary hypoxemia (low blood levels of oxygen). Regular long-term oxygen therapy may be needed if your blood levels of oxygen remain very low. Oxygen therapy is usually used 24 hours a day, especially while exercising or sleeping. Home oxygen therapy is not prescribed for shortness of breath and cannot reverse lung damage or erase your breathlessness. You must have low blood levels of oxygen to benefit from oxygen therapy.

What is the Benefit of Home Oxygen Therapy?

Oxygen therapy can lead to a longer life expectancy by improving the level of oxygen in your system. Supplemental oxygen can improve your quality of life and increase your energy level allowing you to sleep and think better. You can remain active and independent. Your body is unable to store oxygen and the therapy only works while you use it. If you have been prescribed oxygen you will not benefit by using it only for a couple of hours each day. You will need to use it for at least 15-18 hours a day for best treatment.

How Will Oxygen Therapy be Paid?

Medical insurance and/or extended benefits may cover the cost of oxygen. Payment is based on criteria that demonstrate low oxygen levels in your blood. The VIHA Home Oxygen Program may also help with the expense with a subsidy if you meet the criteria of having low blood oxygen levels. You can contact the VIHA Home Oxygen Program at 250-370-8840.

How will I use Home Oxygen?

Oxygen therapy is generally delivered as a gas from a concentrator or cylinder. You breathe it in through a nasal cannula, a two-pronged device inserted in the nostrils that is connected to tubing carrying the oxygen. Depending on your home oxygen prescription, you will use an oxygen concentrator or gas cylinders or a liquid system for portability. Your home oxygen supplier will provide you with the necessary equipment and training to use oxygen safely at home.

Oxygen Concentrator

This is an electrically powered device that separates the oxygen out of the air, concentrates it, and stores it. This system is the least expensive and safest. Extra tubing permits you to move around with minimal difficulty. If you use an oxygen concentrator, notify your electric company so you will be given priority if there is a power failure. Also, avoid using extension cords if possible.

Portable Compressed Gas with Conservers

Small lightweight cylinders with conserving devices are available. These conserving devices release the oxygen only when you inhale and cuts it off when you exhale. These systems can allow even greater mobility.

Liquid Oxygen

Oxygen is stored as a very cold liquid in a vessel very similar to a thermos. When released, the liquid converts to a gas and you breathe it in just like the compressed gas. You can transfer the liquid to a small, portable vessel at home. Liquid oxygen is more expensive than the compressed gas, and the vessel vents when not in use. An oxygen conserving device may be built into the vessel to conserve the oxygen. The tank is refilled every few weeks.

Tips for Using Oxygen Safety

- Never smoke while using oxygen.
- Warn visitors not to smoke near you when you are using oxygen. Put up no smoking signs in your home where you most often use the oxygen. When you go to a restaurant with your portable oxygen source, ask to be seated in the nonsmoking section. Stay at least five feet away from gas stoves, candles, lighted fireplaces, or other heat sources.
- Don't use any flammable products like cleaning fluid, paint thinner, or aerosol sprays while using your oxygen.
- If you use liquid oxygen, make sure the vessel is kept upright to keep the oxygen from pouring out; the liquid oxygen is so cold it can hurt your skin. Keep a fire extinguisher close by, and let your fire department know that you have oxygen in your home.
- Call your physician if you feel any symptoms of illness, or if you experience frequent headaches, anxiety, blue lips or fingernails, drowsiness, confusion, restlessness, anxiety, or slow, shallow, difficult, or irregular breathing.
- Don't change the flow of oxygen unless directed by your physician.
- Water-based lubricants for nose will help if the oxygen feels dry. Don't use an oil-based product like petroleum jelly.
- To prevent the skin behind your ears from becoming irritated, tuck some gauze under the tubing or request ear wraps for your nasal cannula.

Care of Equipment

The home oxygen supply company that supplies your oxygen therapy equipment will provide you with instructions on the care and maintenance of your particular equipment. Learning how to use and care for your equipment may seem complicated so keep asking questions until you are clear on the details and confident using the system. Replace nasal cannula every two to four weeks. If you have a cold, change them when your cold symptoms have passed. If you use an oxygen concentrator, the air filter should be cleaned at least once a week.