



Oxygen at home

Respiratory Department



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What is it?

Oxygen therapy means using an oxygen cylinder or a machine to breathe in air that contains more oxygen than normal.

How does oxygen work?

Oxygen therapy increases the amount of oxygen in the lungs and the bloodstream. A person with a heart or lung disease may need oxygen therapy if they have low oxygen levels in their blood. Oxygen is only used for this purpose - it is not a treatment for breathlessness.

There are rare exceptions for using oxygen, like people suffering with certain diseases of the nerves and/or muscles, or those with a specific type of headache.

Oxygen therapy may be given by different methods, including:

- A tube placed under a person's nose (nasal cannula)
- A face mask placed over a person's mouth and nose (oxygen face mask)
- A tube placed into the mouth and down the windpipe of a person who cannot breathe on their own (an endotracheal tube). The tube is attached to a machine (ventilator) that breathes for the person or via a mask attached to an opening in the throat called a tracheotomy.

What are the benefits of oxygen at home?

Oxygen therapy aims to correct the low oxygen level in your bloodstream caused by your heart or lung disease. By correcting the oxygen level, it helps your body to cope better.

Sometimes you may not feel a direct benefit from using the oxygen, but long term benefits have been shown. Home oxygen can be prescribed in several different forms, and the health professional that assesses you will discuss your lifestyle with you and will decide what would be best for you.

Using oxygen therapy at home

You may only need oxygen at home for a short period of time. Being prescribed oxygen either after a hospital stay or after an assessment by your health professional does not mean you will always need oxygen.

If you do need oxygen at home, it is important to learn how to use and take care of your equipment.

This information will help you get the most from your oxygen treatment.

After your doctor or nurse prescribes oxygen, there are a few things to know about using oxygen at home.

Basic instructions

- Do not light candles, lanterns, fires, and cookers, or smoke while you are wearing your oxygen. There should be no smoking from anyone within the home of someone using oxygen. There is a serious risk of fire or burns.
- Do not change the setting on your oxygen without talking to your doctor/nurse or member of the Oxygen Team first. Turning the flow rate up or down could put you in danger.
- Keep track of how much oxygen is in the cylinder/tank (in case you are not on an oxygen concentrator - a machine that plugs into an electric socket), and order in advance so you do not run out.
- Do not drink alcohol or take drugs that relax you, such as sleeping pills, sedatives or recreational drugs, while using oxygen. They can cause you to breathe too slowly.
- Call your GP if you feel:
 1. Increased shortness of breath
 2. Restless or confused
 3. Have early morning headaches
 4. Very tired
 5. Any new tremor in your hands

If you use nasal cannulae (prongs):

- Wash the nasal prongs with soap and water once or twice a week. Follow the manufacturer's instructions on caring for your equipment.
- Replace the prongs every four weeks. But if you have a cold or the flu, change them when your symptoms pass. Your home oxygen provider can provide this for you.
- Use a water-based moisturiser (such as KY Jelly or similar) on your lips and in your nose to prevent drying and cracking. Read labels and look for a product that lists water as the first ingredient.
- Do not use petroleum-based products (such as Vaseline petroleum jelly) as these can plug the air holes and are also a fire hazard and can potentially cause chemical burns.
- Put a piece of gauze under the tubing to keep the skin behind your ears from getting sore.

Is it safe to use oxygen at home?

Yes, however, you must use it safely. Oxygen is a fire hazard. Follow safety measures to keep you and your family/carers safe.

- Never smoke or let anyone else smoke while you are using oxygen. Be aware of people smoking near to you if you are using your oxygen outside of your home.
- Keep oxygen at least six feet (two metres) away from flames or heat sources such as gas cookers, paraffin or gas heaters, candles, cigarettes, cigars or fireplaces.
- Do not use flammable products, such as cleaning fluid, paint thinner, petroleum based creams or aerosols, while you are using oxygen.
- Keep a fire extinguisher at home within easy reach.
- Keep oxygen cylinders upright. Make sure they do not fall over or get damaged, especially when travelling in a vehicle. Ask your supplier for a transport box.
- Inform your local fire station that you have oxygen at home. They will be able to advise you on keeping safe.

- Ensure you have smoke/fire alarms within your home that are in working order - the local fire service can advise and supply you with these.
- If you have portable (ambulatory) oxygen, make sure you have an oxygen sticker for your car (available from the fire service) in case you are in an accident, and ask your supplier about safe transportation of your oxygen.

Will I become dependent on oxygen?

No. You have been prescribed oxygen as you have low blood oxygen levels. You will be advised on how many hours per day you need to use it.

However, if you want to go out or have a short time away from home, it will normally be fine to come off the oxygen for a while. Sometimes you may be prescribed oxygen to use outside the home. You will not become dependent on oxygen, and it will never lose its useful effects.

Will I have to be treated with oxygen forever?

Every person is different and it is impossible to tell if you will always need oxygen therapy.

Blood tests look at the amount of oxygen you have in your blood. This tells us if you need more or less oxygen.

Can I have too much oxygen?

Yes. It is important to attend any oxygen review appointments or speak to your GP/Nurse if your oxygen needs have not been assessed in the last 12 months.

Oxygen is a prescribed drug that all patients must be carefully assessed for as it can cause harm. Only a small number of people who have been assessed will need oxygen prescribing and benefit from it.

People who take oxygen when they do not have low oxygen levels in their blood may get several harmful short and long-term effects such as, loss of independence, muscle wasting, and an increase of carbon dioxide levels in the bloodstream. As the breathing may become poor, this may become life threatening. If you are worried that you, or someone you know has been given oxygen without proper assessment, please contact your GP or member of the Oxygen Team.

If you were given oxygen to take home when you were poorly in hospital, you need to be assessed again. You may be taking oxygen unnecessarily and risking harmful side effects.

Can I travel if I have oxygen?

Yes. Plan in advance to make sure your trip goes well:

- Talk to your GP for advice on whether you are safe to travel, and what you need to do to stay safe while travelling. Get at least one copy of your Home Oxygen Order Form (HOOF), along with your usual medication, to take with you on the trip. If travelling abroad, have an early discussion with your GP or community nurse.
- Travelling with oxygen can be done if you plan ahead. Before the trip, tell the travel company that you use oxygen. Do this well in advance, as they may have requirements that can take some time to arrange
- Travel insurance is essential when travelling with oxygen. The British Lung Foundation and the British Heart Foundation can provide a list of companies that insure travellers with oxygen
- Your oxygen provider will advise you of a list of contacts and arrangements for travelling abroad. The NHS is only able to provide your oxygen within the UK

Where to go from here

Now that you have read this information, you are ready to start using oxygen at home.

If you have any questions, make a note of them in this leaflet in the space below and take it with you when you visit your healthcare professional.

Space for notes...

For any questions regarding your oxygen, please contact:

BOC for assessment questions on 0800 0121858

Air Liquide on 0808 1439992.

Yeovil Hospital Respiratory Nurses on 01935 384574

If you would like this leaflet in another format or in a different language, please ask a member of staff or call us on 01935 383077.

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