Home oxygen therapy

This chapter will help you to understand:
- When you need home oxygen.
- What the benefits of using home oxygen are.
- What equipment you will need to use home oxygen.
- Who can help cover the cost of home oxygen.

Oxygen therapy

Oxygen therapy is prescribed for many people with chronic lung disease who have low blood oxygen levels. The body can tolerate low levels of oxygen for short periods of time, but low levels of oxygen for long periods of time can cause problems in your vital organs. Home oxygen therapy helps return your blood oxygen levels to normal, thus reducing the damage to your vital organs.

Oxygen therapy is usually prescribed to prolong life and it may also improve the quality of life of the user. While the use of oxygen MAY relieve shortness of breath, in many cases it does not.

When do you need home oxygen?

Most people with lung conditions feel breathless at times. Feeling short of breath is caused mainly by the extra work of breathing.

Important considerations
- You can feel breathless even with normal oxygen levels in the blood.
- Not everyone with a chronic lung condition needs oxygen at home.
- Tests are needed so your doctor can tell if you need home oxygen.
- Home oxygen is prescribed at a flow rate and for a minimum number of hours per day.
- You only get the full benefit if you use home oxygen as prescribed. Using your oxygen as prescribed, and not just when you feel you need it, is very important.
- Using oxygen when it isn’t prescribed can be harmful.

Breathlessness

You have probably learned by now that long term lung conditions, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), bronchiectasis and pulmonary fibrosis, cause breathlessness. People often think that when they feel breathless, it is because they are not getting enough oxygen into their body.
For most people who have chronic lung conditions, breathlessness mainly occurs because it is harder to breathe the air in and out.

This is called the ‘work of breathing’. Breathing air in and out requires more work if the lungs are ‘too full’ (hyperinflated) or are stiff, or if the breathing tubes or airways are narrow. This is why it is important to learn different breathing techniques to help control your breathlessness.

You may have already found that these techniques help when you get out of breath.

Low oxygen levels in the blood

Some people with severe lung conditions have lower levels of oxygen in their blood, either all the time or only when they are sleeping or exercising.

Home oxygen is only prescribed when the blood oxygen level is low. If your blood oxygen level is very low, this means not enough oxygen is being delivered to your vital organs via the blood. In this case, there are benefits of using oxygen at home in the long term.

How do you (and your doctor) know you need home oxygen?

To determine if you need home oxygen, your doctor can order a blood sample to be taken from an artery (usually at your wrist) while you are resting. You’ll probably remember if you’ve had one of these blood samples taken as it hurts more than a normal blood sample. They may also arrange to test your oxygen level by placing a probe on your finger while you are sleeping or walking.

Oxygen therapy is prescribed for patients who have low levels of oxygen in their blood. It is not prescribed to relieve breathlessness. While oxygen therapy MAY relieve breathlessness, in many cases it does not.

What are the benefits of using home oxygen?

A common home oxygen prescription is to use oxygen, set at a flow rate of two litres per minute, for at least 16 hours each day.

Most people notice some improvement when they start using oxygen at home. You may notice that you:

- Feel more refreshed on waking.
- Feel less breathless performing activities, such as showering and walking.
- Are able to think more clearly.
- Have more energy.

People who have severe COPD and very low oxygen levels have been found to live longer if they use oxygen for at least 16 hours every day.

When to use home oxygen

Once you know your prescription, it is useful to work out when you will use your oxygen to make sure that you get at least the minimum hours each day. Wearing oxygen from late afternoon (5 pm), through the evening and overnight while sleeping until the morning (7 am) takes care of 14 hours. In this example, you would need to wear the oxygen for at least an additional two hours during the day to reach at least 16 hours.

Keeping active, even though you may be on oxygen, is important.

Fitting the oxygen in around your weekly routine is important to ensure that wearing oxygen disrupts your life as little as possible. Some people only need oxygen while sleeping, because their oxygen level is okay during the day. Others need to wear oxygen all the time and need to plan their activities to include oxygen.
What equipment do you need to use home oxygen?

An oxygen concentrator is the most common method of giving oxygen. The concentrator is an electronic pump that filters out nitrogen from the air (which is a mixture of oxygen and nitrogen) that we breathe. The concentrator supplies oxygen through long tubing connected to nasal prongs.

Another method of delivering oxygen is via small cylinders. Small oxygen cylinders weigh about five kilograms, come with trolleys or carry bags and can be used when away from home. The cylinders are best used with oxygen conservers that make the cylinders last longer. Check with your local oxygen provider to confirm which oxygen conservers are available in your area. Portable oxygen concentrators are also available.

Who can help cover the cost of home oxygen?

Currently, each state has different arrangements for funding oxygen equipment for use in the home. Discuss with your doctor about the financial support that may be available for your home oxygen.

The Australian Lung Foundation has an information booklet called “Getting Started on Home Oxygen”. It covers many aspects of living with home oxygen therapy, such as:

- How home oxygen therapy works.
- The equipment that is used.
- Practical tips others have found helpful.
- The answers to some commonly asked questions.

To get a copy of “Getting Started on Home Oxygen”, visit www.lungfoundation.com.au or call 1800 654 301.

If you are prescribed home oxygen therapy, register with your electricity supplier to ensure you are identified with them as a priority in the event electricity supply is interrupted.