

I Need Supplemental Oxygen—What Should I Know?

What Is Supplemental Oxygen?

Oxygen is necessary for life and health. When we breathe, oxygen from the air enters our blood. When blood oxygen levels are too low, it can damage the heart, brain, and muscles. Certain health conditions, like chronic lung or heart diseases, can prevent enough oxygen from entering the blood. In those cases, some people may need extra, or supplemental, oxygen.

What Should I Know About Supplemental Oxygen Devices?

Supplemental oxygen is a concentrated form of oxygen delivered through a nasal cannula (tubing to your nose). Devices come in all sizes, including metal tanks (often called cylinders), stationary oxygen concentrators, portable oxygen concentrators, and rarely, liquid oxygen containers. Supplemental oxygen is delivered in 2 different flows: pulsed flow when you breathe in or continuous flow. Pulsed flow is usually a good starting option and helps tanks and concentrators last longer than continuous flow, but some people may need the higher support provided by continuous flow. Talk with your health care professional about which device provides the flow you need at the lightest weight to help you stay active.

How Do I Get Started on Supplemental Oxygen?

To qualify for supplemental oxygen, you must have a low blood level of oxygen (<88%) measured at a clinic visit. Supplemental oxygen requires a prescription from your health care professional sent to a durable medical equipment company that delivers oxygen devices and supplies to your home. Normally you get 1 stationary concentrator, 1 large backup tank, and a few smaller tanks that are replaced periodically or refilled.


Will I Become “Addicted” to Supplemental Oxygen?

Supplemental oxygen is not addictive and will not weaken your lungs. Sometimes supplemental oxygen is needed temporarily while you recover from an illness. Other times you may need it longer. Oxygen needs can change depending on your health. Use oxygen as prescribed and reassess needs with your health care professional.

How Will Using Oxygen Impact Me?

Supplemental oxygen is much more than “home oxygen.” Many people can work, travel, and thrive while using supplemental oxygen, and it can provide relief from symptoms like trouble breathing, anxiety, or fatigue. With a little planning to ensure that you have

Supplemental oxygen is a concentrated form of oxygen delivered into the lungs through the nose using a tube (nasal cannula).



Types of supplemental oxygen devices

- Metal tanks or cylinders**
 - Contain compressed oxygen
 - Deliver oxygen at low or high rates of flow
 - May be portable depending on size
- Liquid oxygen**
 - Supercooled oxygen in refillable tanks
 - Delivers oxygen at low or high rates of flow
 - Portable
- Stationary oxygen concentrators**
 - Filter surrounding air
 - Deliver oxygen at low or high rates of flow
 - Not portable
- Portable oxygen concentrators**
 - Filter surrounding air
 - Deliver oxygen at low or moderate rates of flow
 - Available in a range of sizes allowing varying amounts of mobility

Important safety information about supplemental oxygen

Oxygen is dangerous around flames!

- ▶ Keep tanks secure and away from open flames, heat sources, direct sunlight, or flammable items.
- ▶ Only purchase supplemental oxygen devices that require a prescription and are FDA approved.
- ▶ Never smoke while using supplemental oxygen.

enough tanks or extra portable oxygen concentrator batteries, you may feel more confident going out. If you have difficulty walking, a walker with wheels and a seat called a rollator walker can help you carry the oxygen while keeping you steady on your feet.

How Do I Stay Safe While Using Supplemental Oxygen?

Keep tanks away from open flames, heat sources, direct sunlight, or flammable items. Never smoke cigarettes while using supplemental oxygen. Use tape or ties to ensure tubing is not a tripping hazard. Avoid buying oxygen devices online without a prescription and when not approved by the US Food and Drug Administration.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

UCSF Health
<https://www.ucsfhealth.org/education/supplemental-oxygen>

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