

# Choosing Wisely®

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## Home oxygen after a hospital stay When it's okay to stop using it

It can be hard to breathe after some serious illnesses, such as pneumonia or heart failure, or an attack of COPD or another lung disease. You may still need extra oxygen after you leave the hospital. And you may go home with a prescription for supplemental (extra) oxygen therapy.

Supplemental oxygen therapy uses a tank or a machine to give you extra oxygen. This helps oxygen get to your lungs and heart, and other parts of your body. The extra oxygen can make you stronger and more alert. It can help prevent death in people with COPD (severe chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) who have low oxygen levels much of the time.

But people often stay on oxygen therapy too long. If you start oxygen therapy, you should ask your doctor if and when you can stop. And get a follow-up test, as your doctor advises. Here's why:



**Many people who use long-term home oxygen don't need it.**

After a serious illness, oxygen therapy can help you get better but after you recover, you may no longer need the extra oxygen. Two common tests can show if you need extra oxygen: a pulse oximeter that clips onto your finger, or a blood gas test taken from an artery in the wrist.

Testing shows that some people recover in just a few weeks, and up to half recover in two to three months. For these patients, continuing oxygen therapy is not helpful. If they stop, they do just as well as patients who continue home oxygen therapy without being tested.

### **Home oxygen therapy has risks.**

- Oxygen is a fire hazard, especially near a fireplace, stove, or cigarette.
- Oxygen tubing can cause tripping and falling.
- The nose tubes can cause irritation and nosebleeds.
- It can be inconvenient to be tied to the oxygen tank. Some people find it embarrassing. Often, people become less social and active.

### **Home oxygen therapy has costs.**

For people on Medicare, oxygen therapy costs hundreds of dollars a month. You have to pay one-fifth of the bill yourself, or with your extra health insurance.

The use of home oxygen has almost doubled over the past ten years. About half of patients do not get a follow-up test after two to three months. So they do not know if they should continue or stop the treatment. If you do not need oxygen therapy, why spend the money?

### **How do you know if you need home oxygen?**

Normal blood oxygen levels are 95 percent and above. Home oxygen therapy is helpful when your level is 88 percent or less.

Some people only need extra oxygen at certain times. For example, your doctor may tell you to use oxygen therapy when you exercise or sleep, or if your blood oxygen level is 88 percent or less.

If you've started home oxygen, you should never reduce or stop it on your own. It is important to talk with your doctor if you think your oxygen therapy needs to change. There are serious health risks, including strain on your heart and lungs, if you stop using extra oxygen when you need it.

### **How is blood oxygen tested?**

There are two main ways to test blood oxygen levels:

- A pulse oximeter: This device is placed on your finger or earlobe. It uses light to test the amount of oxygen in the blood.
- A blood gas test: If you need a more exact reading, medical staff will usually take blood from an artery in your wrist.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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