

Chest  
Heart &  
Stroke  
Scotland



# OXYGEN THERAPY



ESSENTIAL GUIDE

# This Essential Guide is about oxygen therapy.

## It explains:

- What oxygen therapy is.
- What to expect at your oxygen therapy assessment.
- The different kinds of oxygen therapy equipment.
- Who supplies and checks your oxygen therapy equipment.
- What you need to know about using oxygen away from home.

# Oxygen and your body

Oxygen is a gas found in the air you breathe. It is needed by your body for many different things. These include:

- Building new cells.
- Digesting food.
- Helping your brain work.
- Supporting your immune system.
- Muscle movement.

A long-term chest condition, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or bronchiectasis, makes it harder to breathe. This means that your body is not getting the oxygen it needs.

This can lead to a condition called hypoxia. Symptoms of hypoxia include breathlessness, poor concentration, irritability, tiredness or fatigue, and swollen ankles.

# What is oxygen therapy?

Oxygen therapy is a medical treatment that helps you to get the extra oxygen you need.

If you are living with a long-term chest condition that affects your oxygen levels, oxygen therapy may help. It can help to improve your symptoms and increase your energy levels, your level of activity and your life expectancy.

You will need an oxygen assessment to find out if oxygen therapy is right for you.

Oxygen therapy will not be right for you if your oxygen levels are normal, even if you are breathless. Extra oxygen when you don't need it can damage your lungs and make your breathlessness worse.

# Referral for an oxygen assessment

You can be referred for an oxygen assessment by your doctor, nurse or respiratory team.

To find out if you need an oxygen assessment, they will ask you about your symptoms and may do a **pulse oximetry** test.

This test measures how much oxygen is in your blood using a small device called a **pulse oximeter**. This is attached to your finger or ear lobe. You may also be asked to do a short exercise or walking test.



Depending on your symptoms and test results, you may be referred for a full oxygen assessment. This is needed to help decide if oxygen therapy is right for you.

# Your oxygen assessment



Oxygen assessments will be carried out by a specially trained respiratory nurse or doctor.

They usually take place in hospital or at a community clinic. They can also take place in your home if your symptoms are very bad.

For the assessment, different tests will be done. These will include blood tests and a simple lung function test called a **spirometry test**. This measures how much air you breathe out in one breath. You may also be asked to do a simple exercise or walking test.

Depending on your results, you may be asked to return to the clinic a few weeks later. This is to see if your oxygen levels have changed over the time.

# What happens next?

If the assessment shows that oxygen therapy is right for you, the next step is to find out how much oxygen you need. To do this, you will be given a small dose of oxygen for at least 30 minutes. Your blood oxygen level will then be checked using a pulse oximeter.

This process will be repeated with bigger doses of oxygen each time until the right dose is found for you.



Your doctor or nurse will then talk to you about your options and what happens next.

It may help to take a list of questions with you. This can help you remember everything you would like to know about oxygen therapy and how it might affect you.

# Starting oxygen therapy

Oxygen is a medicine and needs to be ordered for you by a healthcare professional. This is usually your hospital doctor or respiratory nurse.

You will need to use either a nasal cannula or a face mask to breathe in the oxygen.



A nasal cannula is made of lightweight tubing with two 'prongs' that rest just inside your nose.



A face mask covers your nose and mouth and is kept in place by plastic straps that go around your head.

Only use the equipment provided by your home oxygen supplier or respiratory team.

# Review of your oxygen therapy

Once you start oxygen therapy, you will have regular reviews to check that:

- The oxygen levels in your body are OK.
- You are using your oxygen correctly and for enough time each day.
- You still need to use oxygen.

If you have a chest infection or an exacerbation (flare-up), your oxygen will be reviewed. Your equipment may need to be adjusted. Depending on your symptoms, you may need to go into hospital.

Tell your doctor or respiratory team if you have a change in your symptoms or any new symptoms. Or if you feel confused, more tired or sleepier than usual.



# Your oxygen supplier

In Scotland, oxygen is supplied by a company called Dolby Vivisol.

Dolby Vivisol are responsible for the delivery, set up, servicing, maintenance, regular checks and repair of your oxygen therapy equipment.

You will be given a Dolby Vivisol Patient Information Pack and detailed information on:

- Your oxygen equipment, how to use it and how to look after it.
- Safety when using and storing your oxygen equipment.
- What to do if there is a problem with your oxygen equipment.
- Telling your insurance provider about the use of oxygen in your home or in your car.

# Home risk assessment

Before starting oxygen therapy, Dolby Vivisol will carry out a risk assessment in your home. They will make sure it is safe for you to use and store oxygen equipment.

It is also a good idea to let the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service know if you are using oxygen in your home.

In Scotland, anyone can arrange a free fire safety check and free smoke alarm fitting.



Contact the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to arrange a fire safety check by completing the online form on their website, [www.firescotland.gov.uk](http://www.firescotland.gov.uk), calling **0800 0731 999** or texting **"FIRE"** to **80800**.

# Your oxygen equipment

What oxygen equipment you need will depend on:

- Your health condition.
- Your symptoms.
- How active you are.
- Discussions with your healthcare professional about what type of equipment is best for you.

Examples of oxygen equipment include:

- Oxygen cylinders.
- Liquid oxygen.
- Oxygen concentrators.

Your equipment will be adjusted to control how much oxygen you breathe in. This is called the flow rate. Never change the flow rate unless your doctor or respiratory team tells you to do so.

## Oxygen cylinder



If you need oxygen for only short periods of time you will be provided with an oxygen cylinder.

An oxygen cylinder contains compressed oxygen. Your Dolby Vivisol engineer will show you how to use your oxygen cylinder with a nasal cannula or face mask.

## Liquid oxygen

When oxygen is cooled to very cold temperatures, it turns into liquid. Liquid oxygen takes up less space and can be stored and moved around more easily.

You may be given liquid oxygen if you need a lot of oxygen at home and/or a lot of portable oxygen. Liquid oxygen is stored in a tank in your home. It will come with a refillable portable liquid oxygen unit that you refill from the storage tank.

# Oxygen concentrator

If you need oxygen for long periods of the day, you may be given an oxygen concentrator.



This is a machine that plugs into an electrical socket. It filters out oxygen from the air and passes it through a tube to breathe in through a nasal cannula or face mask.

The concentrator will come with a long length of tubing so you can move around your home while you use it.

If you have a lung condition like COPD, oxygen therapy is often needed for 15 hours a day or more. Most people use it overnight and at quiet times through the day to make up this time.

If you are using an oxygen concentrator, you will also be given an oxygen cylinder as a back-up. Use this if you have any problems with your oxygen concentrator or if you have a power cut. Update Dolby Vivisol right away.

You should also let your electricity supplier know if you are using an oxygen concentrator so you can be added to the 'Priority Services Register'. Being on the register means you should be given support to cover your electricity needs during a planned power cut or in an emergency.

Dolby Vivisol will refund you the electricity costs of running your oxygen concentrator.



# Using oxygen safely

Oxygen can be a fire hazard and special care is needed when using and storing oxygen. However, it can be used safely by following the advice given to you in your Dolby Vivisol Patient Information Pack. It is important that you read this information carefully.

It is normal to feel a bit worried about using your oxygen equipment safely when you first start oxygen therapy. It is also common to have a lot of questions.



Talk to your Dolby Vivisol engineer about any questions or concerns you might have.

You can find out more online at  
**[www.dolbyvivisol.com/services/patients-and-carers/home-oxygen-therapy/scotland/oxygen-safety-advice/](http://www.dolbyvivisol.com/services/patients-and-carers/home-oxygen-therapy/scotland/oxygen-safety-advice/)**

# Safety tips

Smoking around oxygen is very dangerous. **Never smoke around oxygen or let others smoke near you.** This includes e-cigarettes.



When using oxygen, always stay at least 3 metres (10 feet) away from:

- Sparking objects, such as gas cookers.
- Naked flames, such as a lighter or candle.
- Extreme heat, such as direct sunlight.

Do not use oil or grease on any part of your oxygen equipment.

Only use water-based creams and moisturisers. Do not use oil-based moisturisers such as petroleum jelly/Vaseline.

Never make any adjustments to your oxygen equipment unless told to by your doctor or respiratory team.

# Smoking

The carbon monoxide in cigarette smoke prevents oxygen therapy from working effectively. If you or anyone in your household smoke you may not be allowed to start oxygen therapy. This includes smoking e-cigarettes.

Oxygen can be a fire risk. If you continue to smoke, a risk assessment and medical review will be carried out to decide if you are allowed to start oxygen therapy.



Stopping smoking is one of the best things you can do for your health and to prevent further damage to your lungs.

There is lots of free support available to help you stop smoking. Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist for information or call **Quit Your Way Scotland** on **0800 848 484**.

# Skin care

Oxygen therapy can dry out your skin, especially your mouth, nose and lips. To help, try to take lots of sips of **water**.

If your ears become sore where the tubing sits, you can ask for oxygen **tubing protectors**.



It can also help to use a moisturiser (sometimes called an emollient) on your face.

Be aware, however, that many moisturisers contain petroleum or paraffin. This means that they can catch fire and are not safe to use.

Check the ingredients list and avoid moisturisers that include petroleum jelly, petrolatum, white petrolatum, soft paraffin, paraffin wax or similar ingredients.

Instead, use a **water-based moisturiser**. Water will usually be the first ingredient on the ingredients list.

# Being active

Most people on oxygen therapy can have an active lifestyle. If you need oxygen to get out and about, this will be considered as part of your oxygen therapy assessment.

To do any exercise, you may need extra oxygen. This is because your body uses more oxygen when you exercise.



Speak to your doctor about what sort of exercise or activities are right for you.

You may also need an exercise assessment to find out how much you are able to do.

An exercise assessment is usually done using a treadmill or a stationary bike. The assessment will check your oxygen levels and how well your heart is working.

# Public transport



It is usually OK to take oxygen on public transport, but it is best to check with the bus or train company first.

In most cases, a single portable oxygen cylinder or unit for personal use is allowed.

When you are on public transport, make sure your oxygen equipment is secure and will not move around. Remember to turn off your equipment when you are not using it.



You may also be given an **oxygen alert card**. This gives details of how much oxygen you need in the event of an emergency. Always keep the card with you when you are out.

At home, the card should be kept where people can see it. For example, on the fridge door or near the telephone.

# UK travel

Before you book any travel, speak to your doctor or respiratory team about your needs.

Your Dolby Vivisol Patient Information Pack also provides more detailed information about travelling with oxygen. This includes information on travelling on public or private transport, staying away from home in the UK and travelling abroad.



For UK travel, Dolby Vivisol can deliver oxygen free of charge to wherever you are staying. You must check that you are allowed to store and use oxygen where you are staying and that they will take delivery of it.

Requests should be sent to Dolby Vivisol for holidays and oxygen delivery at least 3 weeks before you travel.



# Overseas travel

If you want to travel abroad, your doctor or specialist nurse can tell you if you need a 'fitness to fly' test. **You should always check with your doctor before flying.**



Oxygen supplied in the UK cannot be taken abroad. It is up to you to arrange oxygen for your journey and at your destination. What you need to do to arrange oxygen and how much this will cost will depend on your airline and where you are going. Dolby Vivisol can give you more information on this.

The UK Department of Health and Social Care can give you more information on using oxygen abroad (tel. **0207 210 4850**). Specialist travel agencies are also available that can make arrangements for you.

# Flying



If you need oxygen on a flight, check the airline's policy before making any bookings. **You should**

**also check with your doctor whether flying is safe for you.**

Most airlines will provide you with oxygen if you need it. However, each airline has its own rules about using oxygen when you fly and if you have to pay for it. You can also ask your airline if they will let you carry your own oxygen on the plane.

Remember to check with your airline about whether you will need to use your own oxygen in the airport and when transferring between flights.

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland has more information on travelling with a long-term health condition on our website and in the **Finding Inclusive Insurance** factsheet.

# Travel insurance

If you are going away, you **must** have proper travel insurance.

Travel insurance should be arranged at the time of booking in case your trip needs to be cancelled.

You may need to look around for a company that will insure you. Your travel agent may be able to do this for you.

Dolby Vivisol has its own holiday service called Vivitravel\* that arranges privately-funded UK and overseas holidays.

## **Vivitravel holiday service**

**Tel:** 0330 123 0305

**Email:** [vitravel@dolbyvivisol.co.uk](mailto:vitravel@dolbyvivisol.co.uk)

\*Please note: This is a privately funded service. It is not affiliated with CHSS or another UK based charity. For more information about insurance take a look at the **CHSS Finding Inclusive Insurance** factsheet.

# Home and driving insurance



You should tell your **home insurance** provider if you are using oxygen at home.

This should not affect the cost of your insurance but it will make sure you are covered if you ever need to make a claim.



You should tell your **driving insurance** provider if you are transporting oxygen equipment in your vehicle.

You do not need to tell the Driving and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) about a long-term chest condition\* unless you experience severe dizziness, fainting or loss of consciousness.

\*Note that pulmonary hypertension (PH) is considered a heart condition. If you have PH, you need to tell the DVLA.

# Dolby Vivisol contact details

## Patient contact centre and helpline

For orders, enquiries and information on using oxygen away from home and abroad.

**Tel:** 0800 833 531

**Email:** [patientsupportsco@vivisol.co.uk](mailto:patientsupportsco@vivisol.co.uk)

**Website:** [www.vivisol.co.uk/contact](http://www.vivisol.co.uk/contact)

**Address:** Customer Services, Dolby Vivisol, North Suite, Lomond Court, Castle Business Park, Stirling, FK9 4TU

Our publications are free to everyone in Scotland, in PDF and in print. See them all at [www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub](http://www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub)

For free, confidential advice and support from our Advice Line Team, contact:

**0808 801 0899 (Mon-Fri 9am-4pm)**

**text ADVICE to 66777**

**[advice@chss.org.uk](mailto:advice@chss.org.uk)**

One in five people in Scotland are affected by chest, heart and stroke conditions or Long Covid. Go to [www.chss.org.uk/supportus](http://www.chss.org.uk/supportus) to find out how you can help us support more people in Scotland.

To give feedback or request alternative formats, email: [health.information@chss.org.uk](mailto:health.information@chss.org.uk)

**Chest  
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**NO LIFE HALF LIVED**



**Scan here to see  
all our resources!**

Updated: March 2026  
Next review: March 2029

E22-v.3.0-March-26

Scottish Charity (no SC018761)