

Caring for Seniors with Breathing Problems



Seniors with serious breathing problems take in less oxygen and therefore have less energy to conduct daily life. As a result they often feel tired, anxious, and depressed. The help of caregivers becomes increasingly important as the disease progresses.

In COPD (another name for emphysema or chronic bronchitis), the tubes and air sacs that bring air in and out of the lungs are obstructed, preventing an adequate air supply from entering.

In emphysema, the air sacs (alveoli) in the lungs are damaged, usually from smoking, but also from pollution, preventing them from filling with fresh air. In chronic bronchitis, the primary airways in the lungs are chronically inflamed. Finally, in asthma the inside walls of the airways are inflamed and highly sensitive to irritants, becoming narrower and making breathing more difficult when exposed to these irritants.

People with chronic bronchitis are at increased risk of developing infections, and those with other breathing problems are at risk of having infections exacerbate these problems. To prevent infections, encourage your client to:

- Wash both hands frequently.
- Stay away from people who are ill.
- Take a daily vitamin.
- Eat lots of fruits and vegetables, which contain vitamins and will build up your client's immune system.

Reducing indoor air pollution can help strengthen your client's lung health.

- If your client has central air conditioning, which filters and then circulates cool air, make sure to change the filters frequently, as it is imperative to get all irritants out of the air.
- Make sure there is no mold anywhere in the home, as mold can irritate the lungs.
- Wash bed linens, pillows, and curtains in hot water to kill any dust mites.
- Always run a fan that vents to the outdoors for at least 20 minutes when cooking or showering, as this will help avoid moisture buildup, which can lead to mold.
- Finally, don't use any aerosol sprays or scented products in your client's home, as they can cause breathing problems for the client with lung problems.
- If your client is still smoking, continue to encourage him or her to stop.

Using Oxygen At Home

Your client may need extra oxygen if they are not able to breathe enough oxygen on their own. Your client needs a doctor's order to get oxygen therapy. The order will include how much they need, and how often they need it.

Oxygen can be supplied the following 3 ways:

- **Compressed oxygen** holds oxygen in a metal cylinder (tank) under pressure. The tank can be set to release only the amount of oxygen a person needs as he/she breathes. Compressed oxygen tanks are heavy, and are meant to be used when a person stays mostly in one place. Your client may need help to move or secure it. Smaller tanks and wheeled carts are available to help them move with ease, or when they travel.
- **Liquid oxygen** is kept chilled inside a small, insulated case. The liquid warms and becomes a breathable gas when a person needs to breathe in. Liquid oxygen cases are smaller and easy to carry around. Your client can refill their small liquid oxygen case from a big tank kept in their home. Your client oxygen delivery service will fill their large tank every 1 to 2 weeks.
- **An oxygen concentrator** is an electric machine that stores oxygen from the air. This machine is heavy and may come with a wheeled cart to help you move it from room to room.

What are the types of oxygen breathing devices?



Each device is connected to the oxygen supply with tubing. The tubing should be long enough to let your client move around their house. They may need a humidifier to moisten the oxygen. This may prevent dryness in their nose, mouth, and throat.

- **A nasal cannula** is a 2-pronged plastic tube that fits inside person's nostrils. Place one prong in each nostril. Loop the tubing around your client ears. Make sure your client's cannula fits them well and is comfortable.
- **An oxygen mask** is attached to a plastic tube and covers person's nose and mouth. It is usually held in place by an elastic strap that wraps around the back of person's head. Your client can use an oxygen mask if he/she needs a lot of oxygen. A mask may help if your client's nose is dry or stuffy.
- **Transtracheal oxygen** is given through a small, flexible catheter inserted into an opening in person's trachea (windpipe). A necklace holds the catheter in place.

How to use oxygen safely?

- **Do not use oxygen around heat or flame.** Compressed oxygen can catch on fire. Keep the oxygen container 5 feet away from open flames or heaters, such as candles or hot water heaters. Do not use anything flammable, such as cleaning fluids, gasoline, or aerosol sprays near your client's oxygen. Keep a fire extinguisher and a phone close by in case of a fire.
- **Do not smoke while your client is using oxygen.** Do not let anyone smoke around your client.

- **Do not change the flow of your client oxygen.** Turn your client's oxygen container or concentrator off when they are not using their oxygen.
- **Follow instructions for use and maintenance of your client's oxygen equipment.** Keep oxygen containers secured in an upright position. Oxygen containers may become damaged if they fall over. An oxygen container may cause serious injury if it breaks.