

Tips for the “Newbie” oxygen user

By Roxlyn Cole and John R. Goodman BS RRT FAARC

Tips for the “Newbie” oxygen user were gleaned from my personal experiences from several on-line support groups, at better breather meetings, and in Pulmonary Rehab classes. When I was first presented with an E-tank of compressed gas/oxygen in 2003, my reaction was **“I am not THAT old!” (As if age has anything to do with it.)** Don’t you have anything smaller? And so began my journey through the maze of oxygen equipment and how oxygen delivery systems differ.

Compressed gas O₂, liquid oxygen (LOX), and home concentrators (oxygen made from room air) have been available for many years. Each of these systems comes with different characteristics including the purity of oxygen delivered. Currently, there is a whole new generation of portable oxygen concentrators called POC’s. These are battery powered and enable many patients to travel with oxygen more conveniently. The different sizes and weights are also of major importance.

Then there is the question of just what our oxygen supplier company will provide to you. In my experience...back then, there just wasn’t any information about exactly what equipment they had to supply. Even today in 2015, that information is often left to the patient to figure out on their own. With a computer, a patient can look up the necessary information. A “Newbie” needs to quickly learn how to become their own advocate. This takes time, energy and can be exhausting. Those phone menus drive me crazy! Keep on them to send you *what you need to know*, especially if you can’t find it on the computer. Let’s move on to my experience with the actual oxygen equipment.

Concentrators

Depending on the model, these can be noisy and get hot. Do not locate it under a thermostat. I did and it practically cut off the house heat! It also made the air conditioner work harder in the summer months. There is a bit of good news here however. There is a tax deduction allowed to help offset costs of running the concentrator. Since standard home concentrators require electricity, they are useless when the power goes out. **It is best you learn very quickly that you must have a back-up supply of oxygen** handy at home or wherever you go. The “scorned” E-tank??? Now I keep several extra at home and in my car. Extra E-tanks are wonderful to **have just in case** your outing is delayed by traffic, accident,

weather or whatever reason, as E-tanks just don't leak. **If you don't have back up oxygen, you can go to a local fire station for help.**

Liquid oxygen (LOX)

Liquid oxygen portables are lighter weight and last longer, but they do eventually lose their oxygen (some sort of evaporation process) whether they are used or not, so keep those E-tanks for backup. If you are lucky enough to have your doctor prescribe liquid O₂ for you, and you already have a concentrator, you may have to argue to be allowed to have compressed gas cylinders in addition. Tell your oxygen supply company that they are for back-up. I had to press the safety issue for my life and breathing. My company then allowed me to keep some E-tanks and a smaller portable device with regulator.

When a provider gives you a negative experience, ask your doctor to make it clear in his/her prescription as to what your oxygen needs are. How much oxygen delivery do you need at rest AND for exercise or exertion? Have them give **your highest delivery requirement**; otherwise the supplier will not deliver suitable equipment. For example, if you need over 6 L/min for exercise, you will need a larger concentrator that delivers 10 L/min, because the one they normally deliver only goes up to 5 or 6 liters per minute. If you use compressed gas cylinders, you will need a regulator that is designed for higher flow delivery. The same is true with liquid portables. Normally they can deliver up to 6 L/min, but there are higher flow models available that can go from 1-15 L/min. The supplier/provider will not give you these without the doctor's explicit prescription.

The actual method of oxygen delivery is up to you

The cannula and tubing: long and short, thick or thin, stiff or soft, clear or green, long prongs or short ones, curved or not so curved and even some that downright smell awful. If you are lucky and you were sent to pulmonary rehab classes you will learn a lot there. But, lacking that, if you have a problem and do not have a computer where you can find information easily, you should not hesitate to call your oxygen provider to ask about *anything that bothers* you about your cannula, or how to use your system(s).

Ask for a manual about your equipment. Generally to do this you need to find out who the manager of your oxygen provider is, his desk phone number and his email address. Otherwise, you may get someone on long distance. Some oxygen providers give good instructions or very good paper copy, but years ago, my

introduction was 20 minutes, and I was left without any paper copy of how to operate my equipment. It was a scary and frustrating situation. Thank goodness I was sent to pulmonary rehab. I urge everyone to ask their doctor about pulmonary rehab classes and liquid oxygen. LOX provides the highest and best purity of oxygen.

The long tubes (usually referred to as connecting tubing) attach to your concentrator or liquid oxygen reservoirs. Both of these may have a humidifier attachment. **Humidity is extremely important for your lung/comfort** when supplementary oxygen is being blown into you. Make sure the bottle is on properly, **not cross threaded** or you may lose or leak out the oxygen before it even gets into the connecting tubing that goes to you. One of the first things everyone learns is one's ears feel like they are being shaved off when someone steps on their connecting tubing and it brings them to a screeching stop.

Eliminate those ear sores. Clip the tube to your waistline so the tug goes there instead of up to your ears. Badge clips, office clips, anything that will hold it there. Some even put a loop around their wrist by using a "swivel connector." Smell of the cannula objectionable? Ask for another brand as we all have various sensitivities. Some like an especially "soft" hose. Remember a brand for which you have to pay extra is not routinely supplied. Better yet, look into Oxyview glasses or Transtracheal oxygen delivery.

Lubricate your nostrils. Water-based lubricants help prevent dryness, irritation, and cracking of the nose associated with supplemental oxygen delivery. Prongs too long? You can snip them down, ask for another model cannula, or you might even try a child size cannula.

Concerning pulse devices. Different pulse deliveries give different pulses. Some may feel almost like a "blast" of oxygen. Over time this can actually cause erosions or sores in the nose. Compressed oxygen cylinders give a harder bolus of oxygen. Most of the liquid portables that I have tested are *somewhat* softer in the delivery of a pulse/puff/bolus.

Connecting tube tangles and snarls can be controlled. Carefully coil the 25 or 50 foot long tube and neatly place it into a net bag (the type used to keep delicate items separate). Place it in the clothes dryer with a few buffer towels around it. Remove after 10 minutes. Check to see if it is warm, soft and supple. Upon removal, quickly stretch it out its to its full length. It's nice to have a helper here, one at each end to stretch it out flat to cool. Using swivel connectors between

tubing lengths helps too. Your oxygen supplier can provide them to you. No dryer? Hot (not boiling) water will do the trick to soften the kinky hose, but it is messy. You can even lay the tubing out in the hot sunshine and it will soften the tubing and reduce those kinks to slinky softness where it slithers about behind you.

LOVE YOUR SUPPLEMENTAL OXYGEN. IT IS A LIFELINE, NOT A LEASH. It supplies the energy that every cell in your body needs!

A couple of closing comments.

There are *alternatives* to the nasal cannula. If the cannula is objectionable you can use the Oxyview glasses. They are good for delivery up to 5 L/min.

Want to get **everything** off your face if you are using oxygen 24/7? Check out Transtracheal Oxygen Therapy (TTOT). Call them on their toll free number at 800-527-2667. ASK them to send you a brochure and DVD. That is the system I switched to 9 years ago so I have been “necking with oxygen” since 2006. It is fabulous. I have kicked myself that I hadn’t done it sooner. (www.tto2.com).

I have NO financial interest in either of these companies. I just know them to be great products from which I have benefitted tremendously in the quality of my life. I have a TTO support group in addition to my blog about lung health and equipment which I then post to face book. I try to help everyone and you can certainly feel free to share my article.

Whatever you do....**KEEP MOVING!**

“LYN” Cole is a long time oxygen patient who has put her time on oxygen to good use, evaluating new equipment, assisting with many oxygen programs, and **always** advocating for patients.