



# What should I know about managing the home of someone living with COPD?

THE **COPD** CAREGIVER'S TOOLKIT



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# What should I know about managing the home of someone living with COPD?

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# SAME HOME, NEW CHALLENGES

Caregivers have told us the role of the home often changes for people with COPD. Some spaces take on new meaning because people with COPD find themselves spending more time inside. Other spaces present new challenges or dangers. We've compiled their stories into this graphic to help you develop a new eye for the home environment. It can also help you anticipate new difficulties that arise as people with COPD negotiate new limitations.

## General home

### A smoke-free home

Smoking makes COPD worse; encourage smoke-free care on everyone's part.



### Caring for pets

Shortness of breath limits the ability to care for pets. Seek a dog-walking service or neighbors to help out.

### Emergency preparedness

Being ready for an emergency is a necessity, as even simple injuries can result in hospitalization.



### Use reminders

Notes about leftovers in the fridge or taking medications can help people with COPD manage daily details.



### Taking precautions

Make sure windows and doors are secure to keep potential allergic triggers from invading the home environment.



### Paying bills

The cost of COPD is high and many people need help managing their finances. They also need help staying on top of bills.



# SAME HOME, NEW CHALLENGES (continued)

## Inside the home

### Cooking meals

Oxygen tanks pose a fire hazard when cooking with an open flame. Take precautions!



### Living in the living room

The living room can take on new importance. Strategize on how to manage the TV remote, oxygen tubing, and new equipment.



### Cleaning house

Cleaning requires prolonged standing, and many people with COPD are too short of breath for chores. Consider cleaning for shorter periods of time, over several days.



### Bathroom hazards

Getting in and out of bathtubs and prolonged standing while showering can cause falls.



### New hazards

As walking becomes more difficult, many patients begin using walkers. Rugs, steps, furniture layout, and objects on the floor become hazardous.



### Navigating wheelchairs

Wheelchairs can tear up walls and make using the bathroom a particular chore.



# SAME HOME, NEW CHALLENGES (continued)

## Outside the home

### Bringing gear

Leaving home may require bringing portable medical equipment. Plan ahead.



### Shopping for basics

Leaving home poses new challenges for routine tasks, like shopping. Consider weekly meal planning, bulk purchasing, or meal delivery services.

### Working in the yard

Shortness of breath and outdoor triggers can make yard work difficult. Consider a lawn service, or ask family and friends to take turns pitching in.



### Needing more rides

High medical costs have forced some people with COPD to sell their cars. Try to build a ride-sharing network among family and friends.



### Visiting with family

Visits from family can be great for morale, but also exhausting for people with COPD. Consider shorter events and sit-down activities, like playing cards or board games.



What should I know about managing the home of someone living with COPD?

# HOW CAN I MAKE A SAFER HOME?

Poor indoor air quality can increase the symptoms of COPD and affect how a person with COPD feels in the home. It is important that you work together to manage indoor irritants and pollutants.

Help reduce contact with indoor irritants and pollutants. Managing these indoor issues is important because they can lead to COPD flare-ups.



Tobacco smoke



Pet dander



Dust + mold



Pollen from trees and plants



Strong odors  
(household cleaning products, perfume, etc.)

## Manage indoor triggers

- Avoid using tobacco in your home.
- Avoid using items that produce smoke, such as fireplaces, wood-burning stoves, and candles.
- Avoid using products with strong odors, such as bleach, cleaning products, air fresheners, perfumes, etc.
- Fix water leaks promptly to reduce mold.
- Vacuum and keep surfaces clean to reduce dust and dust mites.
- Keep windows closed during high allergen days (check your local news) and use air conditioner when possible.
- We know you love them, but keep pets out of sleeping areas.
- Have heating and cooling systems inspected yearly.
- If you live in an area where wildfires are common, talk to your healthcare provider about ways to protect the person you care for against wildfire smoke.

For more details on indoor triggers, please visit [RHA's Lung Health Library](#).

## HOW CAN I MAKE A SAFER HOME? (continued)

### Understand/avoid secondhand smoke

Secondhand smoke is the mix of smoke and chemicals that come from a lit cigarette. There is no safe level of secondhand smoke. Breathing in secondhand smoke can harm even the healthiest people. It is even more dangerous for anyone with COPD. It is important to eliminate or reduce exposure to smoke inside the home and other places.

### Understand/avoid thirdhand smoke

Thirdhand smoke is the residue of tobacco smoke that builds up on surfaces, fabrics, and people after someone smokes. The harmful chemicals in thirdhand smoke can remain in your home for years.

#### Thirdhand smoke can be found inside the home on:

- walls and floors;
- carpets, rugs, and curtains;
- counters and appliances;
- pillows, blankets, and bedding.

#### Other places thirdhand smoke can be found:

- a person's skin, hair, and clothing;
- hotel room walls and bedding;
- inside a car.

#### > What can you do?

Create a smoke-free environment by saying no to smoking in and around the home.

Of course, it is best that any smokers in your household quit smoking. Otherwise, maintain a smoke-free home by asking smokers to “take it outside.”



### Move towards smoke-free care

- Don't allow smoking in your home. If your guests smoke, ask them to do it outside. Don't want to be the bad guy? Show them this resource to underscore how important a smoke-free home is to the health of a person with COPD.
- If a family member smokes, encourage him or her to quit.
- Don't allow smoking in your vehicle.
- Only visit smoke-free restaurants and other businesses.



To find more information to quit smoking, go to RHA's Quit Smoking Page.

## HOW CAN I MAKE A SAFER HOME? (continued)

### Be aware of radon and its health effects

Radon is a gas that comes from uranium in the ground. People can't see, smell, or taste radon. Research shows that radon is present in as many as 1 of every 5 homes in the United States.

Radon exposure is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the United States next to smoking. If you smoke and your home has high radon levels, you're at an increased risk for developing lung cancer. Since people living with COPD already face an increased lung cancer risk, it is important to reduce any other risk factors.

People are most often exposed to radon by inhaling it. Here are ways that radon may get into your home:

- cracks in solid floors and walls;
- construction joints;
- gaps in suspended floors and around service pipes;
- spaces inside walls;
- a ground water supply.



To find more information about radon, please visit [RHA's Lung Health Library](#).

### > What can you do?

Testing your home for radon is the only way to determine if you and your family are at risk for radon exposure. Home radon tests are inexpensive and easy. It is important to test your home every two years. You can do it yourself by purchasing a radon test kit from your local hardware store. Or, you can hire a licensed radon measurement professional.



# HOW CAN I BEST MANAGE OXYGEN SUPPLIES?

Supplemental oxygen is one of the most important therapies available to people living with COPD who experience reduced oxygen levels. Oxygen management, however, can be difficult. Here are some tips to help.

## Manage oxygen tubing

Oxygen tubing is a frequent source of complaints from COPD caregivers and people who use oxygen. Tubing on the floor can be a tripping hazard for everyone in the home, including guests. Sometimes people accidentally stand on oxygen tubing, not realizing they are cutting off one's supply. Tubing can also get caught up in furniture or knock things over. Pets, such as cats, may also be attracted to tubing and chew on it. Ensure oxygen tubing stays close to the person with COPD to reduce trails of tubing. Also, make sure to clear pathways for walking to avoid falls.

Consider whether small tanks of oxygen, also called ambulatory and portable oxygen, might fit the needs of the person you care for. These require shorter lengths of tubing. Portable oxygen concentrators can be rolled in their own cases, worn in a backpack on the back or slung over the shoulder.



For more on managing oxygen, go to [UCSF's page Your Oxygen Equipment](#).



### Oxygen equipment storage: a safety checklist

- Ensure you talk to your oxygen equipment supplier about oxygen device safety and oxygen tank storage tips.
- Store tanks that are currently being used in a stand or cart to prevent them from tipping and falling.
- Store extra, unsecured tanks flat on the floor.
- Keep oxygen supplies away from open flames, like stoves or heaters. This could cause a fire. Review oxygen fire safety with your equipment provider.
- Put a “No Smoking” sign in every room where oxygen is used.
- Do not store oxygen systems in unventilated areas, such as closets or cabinets.
- Do not place clothing over oxygen systems.



It's just another small chore I have to do, and I've gotten used to it. I wish he could do it, but I'm glad the mask is clean. If he doesn't have a clean mask and breathes dirty air or germs, he'll get sick and most likely end up in the hospital.

— COPD Caregiver

## HOW CAN I BEST MANAGE OXYGEN SUPPLIES? (continued)

### Keep oxygen supplies clean

Make sure to read and save all instructions that come with oxygen equipment. You can store them in this toolkit, as you may forget how to clean the equipment later. Follow these instructions to keep the equipment working as it should.

Talk to your oxygen equipment supplier (also known as a durable medical equipment supplier) to learn tips for cleaning and maintaining oxygen supplies. Refer to the oxygen equipment checklist on this page for guidance on cleaning and maintaining the oxygen equipment.

### Practice oxygen safety

Oxygen tanks are heavy and bulky, and many people with COPD and their caregivers struggle to manage them. While it can be tempting to stick tanks in a closet just to get them out of the way, oxygen tanks require safe handling. It is important to take care of how they are stored to make sure everyone is safe.

No one should smoke in a room where the person you care for is using oxygen. When using oxygen, avoid being around open flames and keep at least 6 feet away from any source of fire such as a stove, fireplace, or tabletop candle.



### Oxygen equipment: a cleaning + maintenance checklist

In general, most oxygen equipment needs the following:

- Check the instructions that come with the equipment. Don't hesitate to contact the equipment provider if you have questions.
- The nasal cannula, also called nasal prongs, is the portion at the end of the tubing that fits into your nose. This should be cleaned every week or as needed. Wash the cannula in soapy water and rinse it with a solution of 10 parts water and one part vinegar. Rinse thoroughly with hot water and hang dry.
- If an oxygen face mask is used, it should be cleaned twice weekly. Wash the mask with warm soapy water and rinse it with a solution of 10 parts water and one part vinegar. Rinse thoroughly with hot water and hang dry.
- *Never wash or submerge the oxygen tubing in water.* Washing can cause mold growth inside the tubing. Instead, wipe down the outside of the tubing routinely.
- Oxygen concentrators usually require a weekly cleaning of the filter with warm soapy water.
- It is best to replace the nasal cannula every two weeks. Replace the long oxygen tubing attached to stationary equipment every three months.
- If the person you care for has been sick with a respiratory infection, replace the nasal cannula immediately.

# HOW CAN I KEEP MEDICATIONS ORGANIZED?

Keeping all the medication bottles and inhalers organized can be challenging. We've added tips below that can help. Talk with the person you care for about the best way to create a system that works for both of you.

People with COPD often take a number of medications and have more than one inhaler. Keeping medications organized is an issue many people face. Below are tips and considerations that come from other caregivers.

## Consider the best room

Bathrooms are convenient, but may not be the best place to store medicines. Temperature and humidity levels in bathrooms can fluctuate. As a result, bathrooms may not be the best place for storing certain pills and other medications.

The kitchen is often a convenient place to store medication. Just make sure to keep medication away from heat sources, such as stoves and ovens, or even a sunny window. Placing daily medications near items the person uses to start the day helps act as a reminder to take medications.

## Think about safety

While convenience is important, it is just as important to consider safety when deciding where to store and organize medications. Make sure pets and children/grandchildren can't reach medications.

## Include notes and helpful information

Work together with the person you care for to take notes on using medication, oxygen, and other medical devices. These notes can act as reminders for future use. Be sure to also write down proper techniques for using oxygen devices or other medical devices. For new medications, such as a new type of inhaler, consider taking a picture and placing it with the notes to create a step-by-step usage guide. You can store these notes and pictures in the toolkit.



### Storage solutions for safer medication management

- Use a pill box to sort and store medications by the week or month. Some people maintain separate pill boxes for morning and evening pills.
- Try a small drawer unit and label each drawer. This is helpful if other family members also are taking medications. Small drawer units are also helpful if medications need to be stored in the refrigerator.
- Opt for open baskets or bins, labeled to separate vitamins, cold remedies, and medications so no mix-ups occur.
- Open, stackable bins are effective at saving shelf space. Because they are compact, they allow more medications to be stored at eye-height or a safe but reachable level.

# HOW DO WE LEAVE HOME SAFELY?

Getting the person you care for to and from appointments and errands can be stressful. Long distance travel presents special challenges. Here are some tips for making it work.

## Make a plan

Figuring out what to do ahead of time will make leaving the house easier for everyone. Allow enough time for you and the person you care for to prepare for travel. Have a conversation to check on his or her energy levels and level of ambition. This will help both of you understand the goals and ambition level for the outing. It will also help prepare you both mentally for what needs to come next.

## Check the weather

Check weather conditions before you leave home. Pay close attention to any predicted changes in weather, such as intense humidity or cold, which might trigger a COPD flare-up. Pack the right weather protection. Consider, too, if you should start the car to get the air conditioner or heater going in advance.

## Avoid secondhand smoke

Secondhand smoke irritates the lungs and can change how the lungs and airways work. Avoid public smoking areas!



### Outdoor safety checklist

- Sign up to receive air quality alerts (via email or text message) from [airnow.gov](http://airnow.gov).
- Get outdoor allergen levels from your local news or weather websites.
- When outdoor air quality is poor or allergen levels are high, keep windows and doors closed and use air conditioning whenever possible.
- Avoid outdoor activities, especially during peak poor outdoor air quality hours from 1:00-4:00 pm.
- If you live in an area where wildfires are common, talk to your healthcare provider about ways to protect the person you care for against wildfire smoke.

## HOW DO WE LEAVE HOME SAFELY? (continued)

### Be prepared

Ensure you have all necessary supplies, such as COPD medication, oxygen supplies, etc. Make sure you have emergency phone numbers and contacts with you.

If the trip involves air travel, check with the airline before the trip to make sure that the oxygen delivery device is approved for use on the airplane.

### If you are not the transporter...

If you are not taking the person you care for to his or her appointment, create a plan with him or her to arrange transportation. Make sure whoever is providing transportation understands any special needs and limitations of the person you care for.

There may be senior or medical transportation services in your area. Check with your city, village, or municipal transit authority to see what public transportation is available and if it is ADA-compliant.



### Traveling with oxygen

If the person you care for is using oxygen, ask yourself, “Are we prepared?” Sit with the person you care for and answer these questions BEFORE you leave the house or when planning a trip.

- Do we have enough oxygen to travel with?
- Do we have all oxygen supplies we need?
- Have we reviewed tank safety for traveling?
- If flying, have we assessed what is needed for in-flight oxygen and oxygen at our destination?



To learn more about ADA-compliant public transportation, visit the [ADA.gov](https://www.ada.gov) webpage.

# OUTDOOR IRRITANTS AND ALLERGIES

While it's important for people with COPD to keep fit and keep moving, the weather, pollution, and other outdoor air-related things can trigger COPD symptoms. Understanding these triggers can help. Poor outdoor air quality and high levels of outdoor allergens from plants and trees can affect COPD. Outdoor irritants and allergens can include pollution from cars and trucks, ozone, and pollen.



## Extreme weather

Extreme hot/cold/humid/dry weather can trigger COPD symptoms. Pay attention to the weather report before going outdoors.



## Fumes

Factories, cars, and buses produce combustion pollution, such as exhaust and gas fumes. Be thoughtful about where you walk, and check the air quality index before going outdoors.



## Pollen

Trees, grass, and pollen can increase COPD symptoms because exposure to an allergen typically narrows the airways, making breathing hard.



## Dust

Construction sites and roadwork produce dust, which can trigger COPD symptoms. Avoid walking near these locations if possible.

# TIPS FOR MANAGING IN WARM WEATHER

During the summer, try to avoid exposure to hot and humid air. When heat and humidity increase, it is best to stay active indoors and in an air-conditioned environment.



## A working air conditioner

Make sure that your home and car air conditioners are in good working order; make sure to change the filter in your home unit.



## Stay informed

Be alert to the air quality on the hottest summer days and avoid outdoor activities on poor air quality days.



## Find alternative places

When it is too hot to walk outside, consider taking a trip to your local mall or find other indoor activities.



## Designate a back-up

Designate someone as a contact person who calls to check up on the person you care for.

# TIPS FOR MANAGING IN COLD WEATHER

Cold, dry air can worsen COPD symptoms. During fall and winter, respiratory viruses like the flu and colds spread easily.



## A functioning furnace

Make sure the furnace is in good working order; change the filter regularly.



## Wear a scarf or mask

When the person you care for must go outdoors, encourage wearing a face mask or scarf that wraps around his or her mouth and nose. This helps humidify the air he or she breathes.



## Find inside options

On cold days, in-home exercises and activities are best.



## Stock the pantry

Keep a supply of non-perishable food items in case you cannot get to the store.



## Get annual vaccines

Remind the person you care for to get a flu shot every year, and get one yourself, too.