

What's All the Hype About BMC's Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy?

A treatment called hyperbaric oxygen therapy is generating quite a buzz in the healthcare industry, especially at Bend Memorial Clinic. The treatment uses a large high air pressure chamber to literally breathe pure oxygen into the blood stream. Higher concentrations of oxygen help stimulate stem cells, which in turn, stimulate healing in the body.

Currently, hyperbaric oxygen therapy is approved by the Undersea & Hyperbaric Medical Society (UHMS) for 13 different uses. But after some surprisingly successful experiments, experts like Dr. Robert Pinnick at BMC think that should change.

BMC has Oregon's only medical-grade hyperbaric oxygen chambers east of the Cascades. The clinic treats roughly 12 patients per day, and 5 to 10 percent of them have conditions not on the UHMS list. It is legal to treat patients with other conditions often called "off-label" use of hyperbaric therapy – but insurance companies rarely agree to pay for it.

When Jinger Cain's son, Dylan, was born with the umbilical cord wrapped around his neck nearly five years ago, he came out almost blue and minutes passed before he took his first breath. Four months later, the Cains learned Dylan was blind. One year after that, he was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, a brain disorder caused by the lack of oxygen at birth, and one of the health conditions not approved for hyperbaric therapy in the U.S. Dylan has a particularly severe case, and the Cains say doctors told them their son might never walk or talk.

But Jinger became the kind of mother who may ignore traditional advice in favor of what they believe could help their son. So when she heard that hyperbaric treatment had helped other children with cerebral palsy, the Corvallis woman began searching for a facility whose doctors shared her independent streak. Cain called all over Oregon to find a hyperbaric facility that would even consider treating her son. She found it here at BMC.

While off-label hyperbaric therapy carries some health risks, doctors at BMC say the therapy has the potential to treat many other diseases, including cerebral palsy.

"We would like to see the (UHMS) number expanded to probably 25 or 30 diagnoses," says Dr. Pinnick.

BMC bought its first hyperbaric chamber in July 2008 and quickly added two more. The program runs daily from 6:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.

During treatment, patients, like Dylan, lie in a sealed chamber where the air pressure is increased to nearly 2 ½ times normal atmospheric pressure. Instead of regular air, which is about 21% oxygen, the chamber is filled with 100% oxygen.

In late May, Dylan was infused with 500 million to 600 million of his own cord blood stem cells, which his parents banked at his birth. Doctors said it could take six months to see any improvement. But by August, Jinger & Mark Cain was noticing what she described as breakthroughs in Dylan's movement and speech. His right leg and foot seemed less rigid, and Dylan began speaking a new word almost every day. Since then, Dylan is talking much more and his vision and general understanding (cognitive) have improved.

"There are lots of great testimonials and diagnostic papers that show the benefits of hyperbaric therapy for various off-label diseases, including cerebral palsy," Pinnick says. "As long as BMC sees positive results, we'll continue to tout it as part of our total care package."



1. WASH YOUR HANDS

The advice you've probably heard dozens of times from your doctor – wash your hands throughout the day – really does prevent infections. Warm water and soap will kill the germs, but be sure you don't rush. It takes about 20 seconds to really get the job done.

2. WIPE SURFACES

Computer keyboards, telephones, doorknobs, or pens that are given to you when you sign for a credit card purchase – all of these are surfaces that can harbor germs. Keep a little bottle of hand sanitizer handy and use it liberally if you suspect you've been exposed. And don't forget to regularly clean your desktop and phone with antiseptic wipes.

3. SORE THROAT?

When their throats are scratchy and raw, doctors often find relief from items stocked in their pantry and fridge. Herbal tea with honey and lemon is a favorite because it's warm and comforting. The honey may also help if you have a cough.

4. OLD-FASHIONED CHICKEN SOUP

Grandma's chicken soup is a great soother of stuffed noses. The vapor alone clears nasal passages and relieves the throbbing in the sinuses. Recently, researchers have discovered that the ingredients in chicken soup might actually have a medicinal effect on the body's immune system, easing the inflammation caused by cold viruses.

5. EXERCISE YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM

Going for a jog around the block a few times can do wonders for your immune system. One study found that postmenopausal women who exercised for a year had one-third the colds of women who didn't work out. What about exercise if you're already sick? The general rule is if your symptoms are above the neck (stuffy nose, sneezing), go ahead. But if you have a fever higher than 100 degrees, a cough, or chills, hold off on working out until you feel better.