

Prudent Use of Oxygen in Acute Care

What is this about?

“Start oxygen right away...get those sats above 97%...more is better!”

Health care professionals were trained for decades to do this, and it became routine unquestioned practice. However, recent evidence is shifting this culture; we now know that oxygen therapy isn't always helpful and too much can sometimes be harmful.

According to guidelines, the use of supplemental oxygen in acute care that is based on a target saturation (SpO₂) range is safer, less wasteful, better meets patients' needs, and saves time – making it prudent to conduct the titration and weaning of oxygen in alignment with target SpO₂ ranges.

We tend to treat oxygen as a comfort measure rather than a therapy or medicine; medicines have a specific indication for their use and cues for when and how to wean. In addition, nurses can be unclear about their role and weaning protocols are lacking in the literature. But consistent oxygen therapy weaning processes are important because they can help patients to more easily mobilize, eat, sleep, communicate and get discharged when they are ready.

To update Alberta's practices, standardized provincial oxygen therapy orders have been programmed into Connect Care, including target SpO₂ ranges for all ages and different presentations. A comprehensive provincial toolkit is also available; it includes helpful weaning principles and a handout for patients and family to understand the reason for oxygen therapy with tips for how to use it safely while in hospital.

What are the results?

There has been success at pilot sites with simple strategies using one or more of the available toolkit items; early results signal better patient comfort and reduced discharge delays. A single education session with nurses and/or team chats at huddles and handovers focused on titration and weaning of oxygen therapy according to SpO₂ target ranges have been very effective.

This work was a joint effort between the Respiratory Health Section, Medicine Strategic Clinical Network (SCN) and Health Professions Strategy & Practice (HPSP).

For AHS & CH staff, please visit [Insite HPSP](#) -> Resources to access the full toolkit.

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