

What Lyme Patients Need To Know About Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy

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For people with Lyme disease, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to treatment. Each patient will have a unique treatment plan that will most likely change over time. The most common treatments are antibiotics and herbal protocols, but outside of that there are emerging therapies, such as IV nutrition/light therapy and Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy (HBOT). With so many options it's difficult to determine what approach or combination of approaches is right for you. If you've been considering HBOT, here is everything you need to know from a Lyme patient's perspective.

What is Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy?

As a complication from Lyme disease I developed osteomyelitis, otherwise known as a bone infection. It was while I was doing research for treatment of bone infections that I first learned about Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy. Later, I found out HBOT is beneficial for a reduction in Lyme disease symptoms in patients even without osteomyelitis.

So how does Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy work? To receive HBOT, a person is placed in an enclosed, pressurized chamber. This chamber can be a small room that fits multiple people or a large tube-like structure that fits one person. Chambers can be hard or soft-sided and vary in levels of pressure. During therapy, medical grade oxygen may be administered through a cannula, mask, or special hood. A typical session lasts from 45 minutes to two hours depending on your condition and tolerance.

The theory behind HBOT is that the tissues of the body cannot perform properly without oxygen, and in some illnesses oxygen is not able to reach where it needs to go. The pressure of the chamber assists the lungs in acquiring more oxygen than is possible with normal breathing, which is then carried by the blood to the tissues. This therapy is approved for multiple conditions, such as carbon monoxide poisoning, decompression sickness, burns, diabetic wounds, and certain types of infections.

So, does hyperbaric oxygen therapy kill Lyme? In Lyme disease, HBOT is used to increase oxygen to the body in order to kill off anaerobic (can't exist in an oxygenated environment) bacteria. It also has the capacity to increase immune function and repair damaged tissues.

My Experience with Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy

I am fortunate, because there is a clinic near me that uses HBOT as part of comprehensive Lyme disease treatment. Because it is a relatively non-invasive treatment, I decided to pursue it. Then I saw the size of the chamber and I almost changed my mind. I have claustrophobia and need sedation for MRIs. The HBOT technician at the clinic talked me through the process and told me that most people with claustrophobia don't have problems, because the chamber is more spacious than an MRI. After my first treatment, I found this to be true for me; however, it should definitely be a consideration for others with claustrophobia. Especially, because due to the pressurization, the chamber needs a few minutes to depressurize before you are able to get out.

Prior to my first treatment, the HBOT technician walked me through what to expect and provided me with a walkie talkie in the chamber in case I had any questions or concerns during the session.

Once you are in the chamber, the technician will start pressurization. Once it begins, your ears will pop multiple times like you are going up in an airplane. This can be slightly uncomfortable, but not painful. Your ears will no longer pop once the chamber is fully pressurized. In the pressurized chamber, you will likely not feel anything during the treatment, with the exception of a sense of heaviness to your body. It tends to be a relaxing experience and a good time to take a nap or meditate. At the end of the session, when the chamber is depressurizing your ears will pop again.

It is possible for Lyme patients to have detoxification or Herxheimer reactions from HBOT, because of the antibacterial properties. Personally, I've had four sessions. After the first session I only had minor fatigue, but after the second session I had a huge Herx. I experienced a severe headache, nausea, and had to stay in bed for a few days to recover. The following two sessions, I only

experienced slight fatigue that lasted about a day. The reaction to treatment is different for everyone, just like with antibiotic or herbal treatments.

Final Thoughts

When doing HBOT, make sure you are doing a lot of detox. A few supplements that may be helpful during HBOT are binders, like activated charcoal and bentonite clay, magnesium, and the B vitamins. Other common detox strategies, like good nutrition, infrared sauna, and Epsom salt baths may also decrease any Herxheimer reaction you may experience.

If you do not have one of the approved conditions and have HBOT prescribed by a medical doctor, it is rarely covered by insurance. You will most likely need to find a private clinic and pay out of pocket. The number of sessions per week and number of weeks/months you need will all depend on your tolerance, doctor's recommendation, cost, and patient preference. As an example, my current treatment plan is weekly for 8 weeks, then every other week for 2-3 months, then monthly on an ongoing basis. However, I've heard of people doing as many as one hundred sessions. Some people use HBOT as a maintenance treatment after antibiotic treatment is completed.

Lastly, it is very important to find a skilled practitioner, because improper administration can be dangerous. There are some risks, such as ear injuries and lung collapse. These are rare and HBOT is generally considered to be a safe treatment. Read reviews of the clinic you are considering and try to get feedback from other patients. Another good idea is to interview your technician before starting treatment. Write up a list of questions and concerns and ask your technician to talk you through what to expect both during and after a session.

So far, I have a positive impression of my experience with Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy and have decided to continue with the protocol. Time will tell if this is a miraculous treatment or simply another tool in my healing toolbox.