

A Hyperbaric Experience

by Elaine Ruggieri

When the woman at the Los Angeles Hyperbaric Wellness Center in West L.A. gestured to what appeared to be a mini submarine and asked me to get in so I could reap the benefits of a “below sea level” experience, I was, to say the least, less than enthusiastic. Not being one for confined spaces, I was more interested in how fast a person can escape upon a panic attack. But this was no ordinary machine. The advantages many people have experienced with just a few sessions far outweighed my idiosyncrasies.

I bit the bullet and cautiously entered the Mild-Pressured Hyperbaric Oxygen Chamber despite my claustrophobic tendencies. As the Hyperbaric Therapist began zipping me in, I quickly and nervously perused my surroundings. I found myself horizontal in an incredibly immaculate white cocoon with a surprisingly comfortable mattress and pillow. Before entering, I was given a handheld walkie talkie so that, should I feel the need, I could correspond with the woman that I had put all my faith in. You can rest assured I had a tight grip on that gem with my thumb planted right on the communication button. After I was secured in my chamber, the Therapist began to inflate the device (this particular one is portable so it deflates for storage and transport) and suddenly I felt my world open up and was instantly put at ease. This wouldn't be so scary after all and it was far more spacious than I originally thought. So I began to relax and even considered using the time to take a catnap. Lastly, I heard the much anticipated humming noise I was informed about... and that's how I knew I was on my way to a whole new atmosphere.

Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy, also known as HBOT, has been around for many years. The Greek root word “hyper” means “above,” as in an above-average level, and “baric” refers to pressure. Therapeutically, increased air pressure causes more oxygen than normal to dissolve into the body fluids so that it safely delivers a higher level of oxygen to the body's cells. HBOT was originally designed for divers to treat decompression sickness (“the bends”) and can offer pressure equivalent to 60 feet below sea level. This original high-pressure therapy is still the preferred way to go for acute conditions such as burns, open wounds and infections. With the mild-pressure model I experienced, it's as if I were diving about nine feet below sea level.

The potential benefits of several 45 to 50 minute sessions appear endless. It's been known to decrease pain, increase circula-



tion and even enhance an athlete's performance. People with Cerebral Palsy, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Crohn's Disease and Lupus have responded positively to hyperbarics.

Steven McCarty was diagnosed with cancer of the vocal cords in 1998. He had initially received radiation but the tumor soon came back with a vengeance. He ultimately had a Laryngectomy (removal of the voice box). His doctors noticed

that, unfortunately, due to the initial radiation he had received, his incision around the carotid artery wasn't healing. Concerned that it may never heal, his doctors decided to try something innovative to help with the process and close the incision around the artery. Steven received 45 minute sessions in a high-pressure hyperbaric oxygen chamber every day for 14 days in a row. His nurses started to notice results immediately and saw improvement with each session. “My body started growing new skin and my facial hair began to grow back,” says Steven. “My doctor was optimistic and excited about all the new granulation and over time the hole completely closed up.”

I found Steven's success fascinating so I looked further into it and as it turns out, many cancer patients have used HBOT following radiation or alongside chemotherapy to boost the effects and repair the immune system. In fact, it's done wonders for healing all types of problems resulting from accidents, toxic exposures and even sports injuries. More and more people are discovering what this form of therapy can do for them. While it's one of the best kept secrets for conditions such as brain injuries, strokes, diabetic complications and Multiple Sclerosis, it has also been used by people who simply want to relax or revitalize themselves. Women who want to drop hard-to-lose weight or reduce varicose veins have found it helpful. Even business men and women who want to reduce jet lag or sharpen their mind before a presentation have taken advantage of its capabilities.

When used for medical purposes, a person would usually receive at least 20 sessions, but it's not uncommon for someone to pop in for just one session to recharge their batteries. You can even purchase, rent or lease-to-own a portable chamber from the L.A. Hyperbaric Wellness Center for a very affordable price. Just like the one I was in, the portable chambers are easy to transport and assemble in your own home or office.

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Tara rented a chamber for her seven-year-old son, Luca, who was diagnosed with autism and epilepsy. Tara and Luca were first introduced to HBOT in Irvine, California where they had three sessions. “But we needed 40 dives,” says Tara, “so we rented a chamber for two months.” Tara admits they did a total of 38 sessions, or dives as they are sometimes called, which was two shy of the recommended amount. They didn't have a specific schedule and usually completed four sessions a week. “He didn't love it,” she adds. “At first he had some anxiety about going in.” Hey, I can relate, I thought to myself as Tara described the details of their experience. “I went in with him every time and he would just watch a DVD.” Amazingly, Luca's eye contact improved immensely within a short period of time. “He seems a lot more present and aware of what is going on around him,” says Tara with pride. Though they have stopped treatment weeks ago, so far the improvements remain.

Taking the dive herself each time to support her son, Tara noticed a marked improvement with some of her own conditions. A long time asthma sufferer, she's now able to eat dairy, which at one time was a definite trigger. She also noticed temporary arthritis relief in her thumb. Then there are the improvements she didn't think about right away, such as the time she went skiing five days in a row and never got sore. “I would usually get sore especially because I had not worked out in a year.” When asked if she would do it all over again, she said, “It was well worth it but I would rent a bigger one next time so it's more comfortable for the two of us.”

My 50-minute session was over before I knew it. While I immediately felt relaxed once I was secured in the chamber, and apparently fell asleep according to the Hyperbaric Therapist who often checked in on me, I noticed a burst of energy about a half hour after my session. My head was clear and I felt ready to take on anything. I guess you could say I had a sense of resurgence.

Elaine Ruggieri's stories and articles have appeared in many magazines and newspapers including View on Design, Pinnacle, Nob Hill Gazette, The Bachelor Book, and Film and Tape World. She has been the head writer on health educational films used by doctors around the country. Elaine has earned a degree in Naturopathy as well as Television and Radio Broadcasting.