

SCAM OR NOT

# Can Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy Help You Live Longer?

Pressurized oxygen is proven to help the body heal faster. Now it's being touted for reversing aging, boosting your brain and tightening your skin.



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March 16, 2026

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Forget subzero cryotherapy, Himalayan salt caves and infrared saunas. The latest high-end, high-tech contraption to fascinate the wellness world seems to be the hyperbaric oxygen chamber.

Originally used to treat lung disease, as well as decompression sickness in scuba divers, hyperbaric oxygen therapy has recently emerged as an upscale wellness treatment. Proponents say that breathing pure oxygen in a pressurized chamber can improve brainpower, prevent skin aging and boost longevity — but these claims aren't backed up by robust research.

Searches for hyperbaric oxygen have risen over the last five years, and devices — that range from large, hard-shell chambers to soft “body bags” — are being sold online for thousands of dollars, allowing consumers to try “HBOT” at home.

Athletes such as LeBron James, Novak Djokovic and Michael Phelps have said it helps their recovery, and so-called biohackers like Bryan Johnson and Gary Brecka have touted it as well.

However, a series of alarming accidents at private hyperbaric therapy clinics have raised safety concerns, and researchers are warning that their work is being used to make unsubstantiated wellness and longevity claims.

“Using the term ‘wellness’ is giving legitimacy to do things that are not proven,” said Dr. Shai Efrati, head of the Sagol Center for Hyperbaric Medicine and Research at Shamir Medical Center in Israel. “Not only that — it’s also dangerous.”

## What is hyperbaric therapy?

Pressurized oxygen has been used to treat disease for hundreds of years, and it’s been used since the 1960s, to treat radiation injuries from cancer treatment, carbon monoxide poisoning and certain wounds. The mechanism is simple: Pressure helps force more oxygen into the lungs and bloodstream, so that it can be delivered to cells, said Anders Kjellberg, head of the hyperbaric unit at Karolinska University Hospital in Sweden.

As oxygen-rich blood reaches damaged tissues, they respond by generating new blood vessels and cells. The process also stimulates stem cells to help repair tissue.

People with medical conditions like decompression sickness or carbon monoxide poisoning may need only one session at a hospital or hyperbaric medicine facility, Dr. Kjellberg said. But for wound healing, patients often require 30 to 40 daily sessions of an hour or more.

## Is it an effective wellness treatment?

Research on hyperbaric therapy for wellness is still in its infancy, said Dr. Kinjal Sethuraman, the medical director of the Center for Hyperbaric and Dive Medicine at University of Maryland Medical Center.

Many of the claims — that it improves cognition, skin and longevity — stem from a handful of recent studies published by Dr. Efrati and his research group. But his results are being wildly misinterpreted, Dr. Efrati said.

For example, his lab published a 2020 study of 35 adults that found hyperbaric therapy improved two key hallmarks of aging in immune cells: increasing telomere length and decreasing damaging “zombie cells.” But that doesn’t mean the subjects will live longer, Dr. Efrati said. “I would never use the word longevity,” he added.

Other papers from his team found hyperbaric therapy improved cognitive function in older adults, improved VO2 max and increased collagen density in skin.

But Dr. Efrati cautioned that these were small studies carried out under strict conditions that would be difficult or impossible to replicate with consumer-grade equipment, Dr. Efrati explained, with participants completing five 90-minute sessions a week for three months, breathing 100 percent oxygen in steel chambers. There is no reason to believe a different protocol would deliver the same results, he said, dismissing soft-shell chambers as nothing more than “sacks full of air.”

Also, all of these studies are preliminary, and some were limited to cell cultures, not people, said Dr. Sethuraman. Even if you were to follow Dr. Efrati’s exact protocol, she added, you might not get the same results.

## Is it safe?

In 2025, a health clinic owner and a 5-year-old boy died in separate incidents when their oxygen chambers caught fire. In the case of the child’s death, three staff members were accused of disregarding safety protocols and charged with second-degree murder and manslaughter.

Hyperbaric therapy equipment used for medical purposes must be cleared by the Food and Drug Administration, but clinics that offer it for things like performance, anti-aging or longevity don’t need such approval. (Some states have additional

requirements.) Dr. Sethuraman recommended only going to a hyperbaric facility that has been accredited separately by the Undersea and Hyperbaric Medical Society, which sets standards for the practice.

“The chamber doesn’t start fires, but it feeds fires,” said Erika Jordan, the founder and director of Hyperbaric Healing Treatment Center, in Florida. She says her facility requires patients to remove all traces of perfume, lotion or deodorant and wear cotton clothing to prevent static sparks.

Hyperbaric therapy also may not be safe for people with certain health conditions, Dr. Kjellberg said, including some lung diseases, inner ear and heart problems. If you are going to try it, do so under the supervision of a doctor, Dr. Efrati said.

“If you don’t have a physician in charge of your treatment with a license that he can lose if something goes wrong, don’t go there,” he said.

## Are hyperbaric oxygen chambers a scam?

Hyperbaric oxygen therapy can be very effective for certain injuries, if it is conducted in an F.D.A.-approved steel chamber. But if you are hoping to extend your life or improve your skin in a plastic booth at a commercial clinic for just an hour or so, experts say you are probably squandering time and money.

Unless you’re a world-class athlete using it to speed up recovery, you’re not likely to see much benefit. “In professional sports, the margins are so small,” said Dr. Kjellberg. “It could add something, but for normal people it may well be just a waste of money.”

And the cost of 60 hyperbaric sessions (\$6,000 or more) might be better spent on a personal trainer.