

What Pulse Oximetry Misses

Nursing

A saturation reading answers one narrow question and stays silent about several others.

It does tell you

- Percentage of haemoglobin carrying oxygen
- A pulsatile signal is present at the probe
- A trend, when the probe stays in one place
- That a falling value deserves attention

It does not tell you

- Whether ventilation is adequate
- Carbon dioxide level, at all
- How much haemoglobin there is to carry oxygen
- Carbon monoxide poisoning; may read high
- Anything reliable in poor perfusion or motion
- Skin pigmentation can bias readings upward

THE DIFFERENCE THAT MATTERS

A normal saturation on high-flow oxygen is not a normal patient — record the oxygen delivered alongside the number.

Educational reference. Bias across skin tones is documented and debated; read the number with rate, effort and the patient's