

THE STUFFY NOSE

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Trouble breathing through the nose is one of man's most common disturbances. Sometimes this may be only a minor and temporary problem. Other times it may be a source of considerable discomfort or threat to health. Anything that interferes with the proper open nasal passage will cause an obstruction to the free flow of air through the nostrils and lead to nasal congestion. When this progresses, the person will have to breathe through their mouth. There are several categories of problems which cause nasal congestion.

Structural Causes

Deformities in the internal or external structure of the nose are often the result of injuries. The nasal septum is a structure which normally acts like a wall in the middle of the nose, separating the left and right nostril. Ideally the septum is straight and thin and goes right down the middle of the nose. If it becomes deformed, it may be thickened and bent, obstructing one or both nostrils. Other causes of obstruction include deformities in other structures in the nose. Most of these anatomic causes of obstruction, including the deformed septum, can be corrected with simple surgery, performed either in the office or as an outpatient in the hospital under local or general anesthesia. As a rule, nasal surgery performed to improve breathing is not associated with any facial swelling or black-and-blue changes, does not require any nasal packing, and does not involve much discomfort during or after surgery.

Children with nasal obstruction often have enlarged tonsils or adenoids. The adenoids are tonsil-like tissues which fill the area behind the nose up behind the palate. Children with this problem often have noisy breathing at night and snore heavily. They may repeatedly stop breathing for periods of time during their sleep. Surgery may be indicated to remove the adenoids and sometimes the tonsils.

Infections

Adults suffer a common "cold" on the average of two or three times a year. Children tend to have colds more often, and adults less often as they get older and develop more immunity. Viruses generally cause colds. They are associated with swelling in the lining of the nose and an outpouring of clear, watery mucous drainage. Decongestant medications and nasal sprays help relieve the symptoms of a "cold." Zicam nasal gel, which can be purchased without a prescription, can be very effective in shortening the duration of a cold from about 9 to about 2 days, but the medication must be started within the first or second day of the cold.

Often a bacterial infection of the nose and sinuses will follow a viral infection because the virus may break down the resistance of the nose and allow invasion by bacteria. When the color of the nasal mucous turns from clear to yellow or green it usually indicates that a bacterial infection has followed a viral infection.

Acute sinus infections are associated with nasal discharge, thick drainage from the nose, facial pain, and often fever. These infections normally respond readily to antibiotic treatment. Chronic sinus infections may not cause pain, but are often associated with nasal congestion and usually nasal or postnasal drainage is present. These infections require treatment with antibiotics and sometimes surgery to promote drainage of the sinuses and remove irreversibly diseased tissues. Recent advances now permit surgery to be performed by endoscopic techniques, permitting outpatient surgery under local or general anesthesia with a minimum of discomfort and a maximum of safety and effectiveness.

Allergy

Usually allergic conditions that cause nasal stuffiness are associated with sneezing and runny nose; often with watery/itchy eyes, headaches, and postnasal drainage. Sometimes, however, nasal congestion may be the only symptom of an allergic problem which causes swelling in the lining of the nasal membranes. Treatment may involve antihistamines, decongestants, prescription nasal sprays, or avoidance of the substance causing the allergic response. For chronic problems, allergy testing may help identify the problem; allergy injections often offer the best relief, with the minimum of side effects.

Growths

Malignant tumors of the nose and sinuses are rare, but their presence must be ruled out in cases of chronic nasal congestion, especially if associated with bleeding. The most common "growths" are nasal polyps, which are fleshy growths, usually caused by allergy and/or infection. They cause nasal obstruction by plugging the nasal passages. Polyps often require treatment with antibiotics, allergy medications, allergy injections, and surgery.

Stuffy nose is a symptom that may be caused by various medical conditions, including many not listed above. Proper diagnosis must be made to provide treatment of the specific cause. Fortunately, however, most patients can be relieved of this always aggravating, and sometimes dangerous disturbance.