



Department of ENT

YOU AND YOUR STUFFY NOSE

Nasal congestion, stuffiness, or obstructions to nasal breathing are among the oldest and most common complaints. While it can cause a mere nuisance to some persons, to others it is considerable discomfort that detracts from the quality of their lives. The causes of nasal obstruction have been classified into four categories, though it is usual for a patient to have more than one factor involved in his particular case.

INFECTION

Usually adults suffer a common cold two to three times per year. Children are likely to suffer more often and it reduces as they develop more immunity with the age. The common cold is caused by different viruses, some of which are transmitted through the air, but most of them are transmitted from hand-to-nose contact. The virus causes release of body chemical histamine, which dramatically increases the blood flow to the nose causing swelling and congestion of nasal tissues, and stimulates the nasal membranes to produce excessive amounts of mucus. Antihistamines and decongestants are used to help relieve the symptoms of cold.

During a virus infection, the nose has poor resistance against bacterial infections, which causes bacterial infections of the nose and sinuses. When the nasal mucus turns from clear to yellow or green, it usually indicates that a bacterial infection has taken over and a physician should be consulted.

Acute sinus infections produce nasal congestion, thick discharge, pain and tenderness in the cheeks and upper teeth, between and behind the eyes, or above the eyes and in the forehead, depending on which sinuses are involved.

Chronic sinus infections may or may not cause pain, but nasal obstruction and offensive nasal or postnasal discharge is often present. Some people develop polyps (fleshy growths in the nose) from sinus infections, and the infection can spread down into the lower airways leading to chronic cough, bronchitis, and asthma. Acute sinus infection generally responds to antibiotic treatment; chronic sinusitis usually requires surgery.



STRUCTURAL CAUSES

Included in this category are deformities of the nose and the nasal septum, which is the thin, flat cartilage and bone that separates the nostrils and nose into its two sides. These deformities are usually caused by an injury that might have occurred many years earlier. 7 percent of newborn babies suffer significant nasal injury just from the birth process and it is almost impossible to go through life without getting hit on the nose at least once. Therefore, deformities of the nose and the deviated septum are among the common problems. Deformities creating obstruction to breathing can be treated with surgery.

One of the most common causes for nasal obstruction in children is enlargement of the adenoids, tonsil-like tissues that fill the back of the nose up behind the palate. Children with this problem breathe noisily and even snore. They also are chronic mouth breathers, and develop a "sad" long face and sometimes dental deformities. Surgery to remove the adenoids and the tonsils may be advisable.

Other causes in this category include nasal tumors and foreign bodies. Children are prone to inserting various objects such as peas, beans, cherry pits, beads, buttons, safety pins, and bits of plastic toys into their noses. One-sided stinking discharge can be caused by a foreign body. A physician should be consulted.

ALLERGY

Hay fever, rose fever, grass fever, and summertime colds are various names for allergic rhinitis.

Allergy is an exaggerated inflammatory response to a foreign substance which, in the case of a stuffy nose, is usually pollen, mold, animal dander, or house dust. Foods sometime play a role. Pollens cause problems during spring (trees) and summer (grasses) or fall (weeds) whereas house dust allergies and mold may be a problem throughout the year. Ideally the best treatment is to avoid these substances, but that is impractical in most cases.

In the allergic patient, the release of histamine and similar substances results in congestion and excess production of watery nasal mucus. Antihistamine helps relieve the sneezing and runny nose.

Combinations of antihistamines with decongestants are also available. All these preparations have potential side effects, and patients must heed the warnings of the package or prescription insert. This is especially important if the patient suffers from high blood pressure, glaucoma, irregular heart beats, difficulty in urination, or is pregnant.

Allergy shots are the most specific treatment available, and they are highly successful in allergic patients. Skin tests or at times blood tests are used to make up treatment vials of substances to which the patient is allergic.

Patients with allergies have an increased tendency to develop sinus infections and require treatment.

VASOMOTOR RHINITIS

"Rhinitis" indicates inflammation of the nose and nasal membranes. "Vasomotor" means blood vessel forces. The membranes of the nose have an abundant supply of arteries, veins, and capillaries, which have a great capacity for both expansion and constriction. Normally these blood vessels are in a half-constricted, half-open state. But the hormones of stimulation (i.e., adrenaline) increase when a person exercises vigorously. The adrenaline causes constriction or squeezing of the nasal membranes so that the air passages open up and the person breathes more freely.

The opposite takes place when an allergic attack or a "cold" develops: The blood vessels expand, the membranes become congested (full of excess blood), and the nose becomes stuffy, or blocked.

In addition to allergies and infections, other events such as psychological stress, inadequate thyroid function, pregnancy, certain anti-high blood pressure drugs, overuse or prolonged use of decongesting nasal sprays and irritants can also cause nasal blood vessels to expand, leading to vasomotor rhinitis.

In the early stages of each of these disorders, the nasal stuffiness is temporary and reversible. It improves if the primary cause is treated. However, if the condition persists for a long period, the blood vessels lose their capacity to constrict. They become somewhat like varicose veins. They fill up when the patient lies down and when he/she lies on one side, the lower side becomes congested. The congestion often interferes with sleep. So it is helpful for stuffy patients to sleep with the head of the bed elevated two to four inches by placing a brick or two under each castor of the bedposts at the head of the bed. Surgery may offer dramatic and long time relief.

SUMMARY

Stuffy nose is one symptom caused by a remarkable array of different disorders, and the physician with special interest in nasal disorders will offer treatments based on the specific causes.