

Your Nose, the Guardian of Your Lungs

You might not think your nose is a vital organ, but indeed it is! To understand its importance, all that most people need to experience is a bad cold. Nasal congestion and a runny nose have a noticeable effect on quality of life, energy level, ability to breathe, ability to sleep, and ability to function in general.

WHY IS YOUR NOSE SO IMPORTANT?

It processes the air that you breathe before it enters your lungs. Most of this activity takes place in and on the turbinates, located on the sides of the nasal passages. In an adult, 18,000 to 20,000 liters of air pass through the nose each day.

YOUR NOSE PROTECTS YOUR HEALTH BY:

- Filtering all that air and retaining particles as small as a pollen grain with 100% efficiency.
- Humidifying the air that you breathe, adding moisture to the air to prevent dryness of the lining of the lungs and bronchial tubes.
- Warming cold air to body temperature before it arrives in your lungs.

For these and many other reasons, normal nasal function is essential. Do your lungs a favor; take care of your nose.

TIP: Keep a list of all your medications; know all the potential side effects; and discuss possible interactions with your doctors.

Because the connection between the nose and lungs is so important, paying attention to problems in the nose--allergic rhinitis for instance can reduce or avoid problems in the lungs such as bronchitis and asthma. Ignoring nasal symptoms such as congestion, sneezing, runny nose, or thick nasal discharge can aggravate lung problems and lead to other problems:

- Nasal congestion reduces the sense of smell.
- Mouth breathing causes dry mouth, which increases the risk of mouth and throat infections and reduces the sense of taste. Mouth breathing also pulls all pollution and germs directly into the lungs; dry cold air in the lungs makes the secretions thick, slows the cleaning cilia, and slows down the passage of oxygen into the blood stream.
- Ignoring nasal allergies increases the chance that you will develop asthma; it also makes asthma worse if you already have it.

So, it is important to treat nasal symptoms promptly to prevent worsening of lung problems.

TIPS TO IMPROVE THE HEALTH OF YOUR NOSE AND LUNGS:

If your nose is dry, its various functions will be impaired. Try over-the-counter salt-water (saline) nasal mists and sprays to help maintain nasal health. These can be used liberally and at your discretion.

Beware of over-the-counter nasal decongestant sprays; prolonged use of these sprays may damage the cilia that clear the nose and sinuses. Decongestants can become addictive and actually cause nasal congestion to get worse.

Think of your nose when you're traveling. Air-conditioned cruise ships may have high levels of mold in the cabins. Airplane air is very dry and contains a lot of recirculated particles and germs; a dry nose is more susceptible to germs. Use saline nasal mist frequently during the flight, and drink lots of water.

MEDICATIONS PRESCRIBED TO TREAT NASAL PROBLEMS:

Be aware of the nasal effects of other medications

- Diuretic blood pressure medications cause dryness in the nose and throat, making them more susceptible to germs and pollens.
- Many anti-anxiety medications also have a drying effect on the nose and throat.
- Birth control pills, blood pressure medicines called beta-blockers, and Viagra can cause increased nasal congestion.
- Eye drops can aggravate nasal symptoms when they drain into the nose with tears.

Be sure you understand their purpose. Each one is important and plays a separate role in treating nasal symptoms.

The foundation of the treatment of chronic nasal conditions is the regular use of an anti-inflammatory prescription nasal spray, which address all types of nose and sinus inflammation. These sprays should be used only as directed by your doctor. This is in contrast to medications that are inhaled by mouth into the lungs, which often have high levels of absorption into the blood stream. Always aim nasal sprays to the side of the nose; spraying into the center of the nose can cause too much dryness.

Antihistamines effectively relieve sneezing, itching and runny nose, but they have no effect on nasal congestion at least in the short term. Over-the-counter antihistamines cause drowsiness, slow the cleaning function of the cilia, and increase the stickiness of nasal mucus--causing germs and pollens to stay in the nose longer. There are prescription antihistamines that do not have any of these side effects. To achieve this safety, the relief is often slower starting, so patience is required.

Decongestants help to unclog stopped up noses but do very little for runny noses and sneezing. They work much faster to unclog the nose, but to achieve this quick action, there are often side-effects such as dry mouth, nervousness, and insomnia. The correct dose often has to be customized to get the benefit without the side-effects.

Be aware of medication side effects; no medicine works well for all people, and all medications can cause side effects.