



NASAL SPRAY ADDICTION

The definition of addiction is as follows: the state of being enslaved to a habit or practice or to something that is psychologically or physically habit-forming, as narcotics, to such an extent that its cessation causes severe trauma. You cannot become addicted to a nasal spray. Over-the-counter nasal sprays don't contain habit-forming ingredients, and they don't cause the compulsive cravings that mark an addiction. However, it is possible to develop a tolerance to nasal sprays. After a few days of using a decongestant nasal spray, your nasal membranes may become tolerant — or less responsive — to the effects of the medication. You may find yourself using more and more of the nasal spray to provide relief from the congestion. You may find that the congestion got worse after you stopped using the nasal spray. This is not nasal spray addiction. The condition you are experiencing is called “rebound congestion”.

One of the most common patient complaints in my office is chronic nasal obstruction or a “stuffy” nose. The inability to breathe through your nose can truly make you miserable. Nasal congestion can be just as uncomfortable as a runny nose, and often the causes are the same. Nasal congestion can be caused by a cold or the flu, allergies to dust, pollen or pet dander, or a nonallergic inflammation of blood vessels in your nose (vasomotor rhinitis). This occurs when the nasal blood vessels expand in response to exercise, cold air, spicy food, even stress. A number of medications also can dry out your nose and throat, leading to nasal congestion. These include:

- Diuretics
- Anti-anxiety medications
- Birth control pills and erectile dysfunction medications such as Viagra
- Beta blockers
- Nasal decongestants, especially when used for more than a few days

Less often, nasal congestion may result from a deformity in the bony partition separating your two nasal chambers (nasal septum) or a growth in your nasal passage, such as a nasal polyp. Children may also get a foreign object in their noses that leads to congestion.

As you can see, there are multiple potential causes for this problem, however, overuse of the over-the-counter nasal sprays is one of the most frequent causes of nasal congestion. If I see that little white bottle poking out of a patient's shirt pocket and they also admit having a bottle of spray on their night stand, as well as in their glove box, then we are in trouble. People typically start using them when they get a cold or have an allergy flare-up. It is not uncommon to find people who have been using nasal sprays for years and years.

There are a multiple of trade names for other the counter nasal sprays such as: Neoseneprine, Afrin, and 4Way. The chemical names are phenylephrin, oxymetazoline, or xylometazoline. Unfortunately, these nasal sprays cause problems if they are used for longer than three to four days they typically cause the rebound congestion. The medication basically causes the tiny blood vessels in the mucus membranes to constrict causing temporary shrinkage in the lining of the nose and therefore better breathing. After a few days however, the blood vessels become severely congested when the medication wears off. This results in the need to use a nasal spray every few hours.

If you develop rebound congestion (a tolerance to decongestant nasal sprays), it isn't permanent. Going "cold turkey" is obviously the quickest and simplest method; however, this may be ineffective for some people. If you are one of those people, you can talk to your doctor about other methods for reducing nasal congestion, such as prescription strength oral decongestants, saline nasal sprays or steroid nasal sprays. These medications do not cause rebound congestion, however, one must be careful of the potential side effects from these medications. The decongestants need to be taken one week beyond your last dose of nasal spray. Tapering the nasal spray also may be effective. As an Ear, Nose and Throat specialists we recommend decreasing your daily dose by one dose at three day increments until you have gradually stopped using those sprays all together. For those with severe rebound congestion we find that tapering one side of the nose at a time may be the best option. This will at least allow you to breathe well through one side of the nose. Also, adding a saltwater nasal spray, three to four puffs, six to eight times a day, will help moisten the swollen membranes and loosen crust which are associated with the chronic use of nasal spray.

Is nasal congestion serious?

Although nasal congestion is just an annoyance for most older children and adults, it can be serious in infants. Babies who are congested in the first months of life have trouble nursing and can experience breathing problems. If your child is younger than 3 months, call your pediatrician at the first sign of illness. You can usually treat an older baby's nasal congestion by giving plenty of fluids, moistening the air in your home, suctioning the baby's nose and using saline nasal drops or a homemade nasal irrigation wash made of 1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon of salt mixed with 2 cups of warm water.

What will help nasal congestion?

Try these measures to relieve your stuffy nose:

- **Steam.** One of the simplest ways to break up congestion is to inhale steam from a hot shower or a humidifier.
- **Fluids.** Drink plenty of liquids, such as water, juice or tea, to help thin mucus. Avoid caffeinated beverages, which can cause dehydration and aggravate your symptoms.
- **Chicken soup.** Eating any kind of soup is soothing, but eating chicken soup has been shown to speed the movement of mucus through the nasal passages. This

helps relieve congestion and limit the amount of time viruses are in contact with the nasal lining.

- **Salt water.** Use an over-the-counter nasal saline spray or prepare your own saltwater solution using 1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon of salt mixed with 2 cups of warm water. Both can be extremely effective at relieving congestion.
- **Breathing strips.** Most drugstores and some supermarkets sell adhesive strips that you place across the bridge of your nose. These strips open the nasal passages, allowing you to breathe more freely.
- **Decongestants.** Beware of over-the-counter decongestants. If used for more than two or three days, they can actually make congestion worse. All decongestants — oral or topical — may have a stimulant effect and raise blood pressure in some people. Children shouldn't use them at all. There's no evidence that they work in children, and they can have serious side effects. Gentler options such as steam, nasal rinses and breathing strips are more effective and don't have side effects.

If you are unsuccessful in getting relief from your nasal congestion, a trip to see one of our Ear, Nose and Throat doctors may be necessary. We are usually able to facilitate discontinuation of nasal sprays with prescription strength medication. We will also carefully search for the underlying cause of the nasal stuffiness which caused the need for nasal sprays in the first place. Problems such as anatomic obstruction, nasal allergies, chemical sensitivities or chronic sinusitis, are often to blame and can be treated effectively. So the next time you are thinking about reaching for that over-the-counter nasal spray, be careful because you may wind up with more than you bargained for. If you feel it's time you can schedule an appointment to see one our physicians at any of our eight convenient locations.

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