



ARKANSAS OTOLARYNGOLOGY CENTER

EAR | NOSE | THROAT

Stuffy Noses

There are four main causes of nasal obstruction: infection, structural abnormalities, allergic, and nonallergic (vasomotor) rhinitis. Patients often have a combination of these factors which vary from person to person.

What are the causes of nasal congestion?

Infection

An average adult suffers a “common cold” two to three times per year. These viral infections occur more often in childhood because immunity strengthens with age. A cold is caused by one of many different viruses, some of which are airborne, but most are transmitted by hand-to-nose contact. Once the virus is absorbed by the nose, it causes the body to release histamine, a chemical which dramatically increases blood flow to the nose and causes nasal tissue to swell. This inflames the nasal membranes which become congested with blood and produce excessive amounts of mucus that “stuffs up” the nasal airway. Antihistamines and decongestants help relieve the symptoms of a cold, but no medication can cure it. Ultimately, time is what is needed to get rid of the infection.

During a viral infection, the nose has poor resistance to bacteria, which is why infections of the nose and sinuses often follow a “cold.” When the nasal mucus turns from clear to yellow or green, it is possible that a bacterial infection has set in. In this case, a physician should be consulted.

Acute sinus infections produce nasal congestion and thick discharge. Pain may occur in 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 usually involve nasal obstruction and offensive nasal or postnasal discharge. Some people develop polyps (fleshy growths in the nose) from sinus infections, and the infection can spread to the lower airways, leading to a chronic cough, bronchitis, or asthma. Acute sinus infections generally respond to antibiotic treatment; chronic sinusitis may require surgery.

Structural abnormalities

These include deformities of the nose and nasal septum; the thin, flat cartilage and bone that divides the two sides of the nose and nostrils. These deformities can be the result of an injury, sometimes having occurred in childhood. If structural abnormalities result in the obstruction of nasal breathing, surgical correction may be helpful.

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