

Children and nasal congestion

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What is NASAL CONGESTION?

This is a symptom of a condition and NOT a condition. Swollen membranes lining the nose are causing nasal congestion due to inflamed blood vessels. Thick mucal discharge often accompanies nasal congestion. Many impurities such as pollens, mould spores, dust and germs from others who are coughing and sneezing are in the air that we breathe.

Because our nose acts as a filter, our body's immune system, recognises anything that shouldn't be there and the body's chemical "histamine" will be released. Blood flow to the nose will dramatically increase due to the histamine and swelling and congestion of the nasal tissue will occur. Swelling stimulates the nasal membranes to produce excessive amounts of mucus, which is an attempt to "flush out" whatever our bodies want to get rid of.

Causes of NASAL CONGESTION

Common reasons for nasal congestion in the early years of life include:

- Dry air
- Irritants
- Infections
- Allergies
- Enlarged adenoids
- Foreign bodies
- Overuse of some nasal sprays and drops

Dry air

After being in amniotic fluid for 40 weeks in utero, the sudden exposure to dry air which usually occurs during winter months, air conditioners and heaters, can dry out newborn babies nasal secretions and causes NASAL CONGESTION. Their tiny noses and narrow nasal passages are VERY SENSITIVE to dry air. When swelling occurs they snort, especially during feeding time.

Advice:

- Saline nasal drops or sprays may be useful to moisten nasal passages especially before feeding time.
- Breastfeeding moms can apply a few drops of breast milk in the nostrils to moisten before a feed.
- Vaporisers or humidifiers add moisture to the air especially during dry winter months.

Irritants

- Dust
- Exhaust fumes
- Tobacco smoke
- Moulds
- Animal dander
- Pollens

These can all irritate the delicate tissue in baby and toddlers' nasal passages which may lead to NASAL CONGESTION.

Advice:

- Ensure that the house is vacuumed and cleaned on a daily basis.
- No smoking in the house or near children. REMEMBER that the smoke clings to your clothes although you are smoking outside the house.
- Saline drops usually clear and settle the irritation.

Infections

A common symptom of an upper respiratory infection like a cold or flu is NASAL CONGESTION and a discharge.

Colds and flu are very common in infancy and early childhood because of an immature immune system.

It is normal for a baby to experience 6-8 episodes of a common cold during its first year of life which may be accompanied by a middle ear infection and a sinus infection.

Advice:

- KEEP THE NOSE CLEAR.
- Encourage the use of nasal aspirators to remove the mucus.
- Keep the child rehydrated. Lots of fluids help to thin the mucus.
- Elevate the mattress by putting a pillow under it on the head side. Congestion and pressure on the middle ear is worse when lying down.

Allergies

A common symptom of an allergic reaction is NASAL CONGESTION.

Causes:

- A substance in the air like pollens, common during spring and summer.
- A substance that is not airborne, such as mould, animal hair, dust mites.
- Less common to allergens contained in dairy, food or medication.

Signs and symptoms

- Sneezing
- Endless sniffing
- Itchy watery eyes
- Skin rash
- Mouth breather instead of nose breather. All babies and toddlers should be nose breathing.
- Dry cough, especially in the morning.

DUST MITES flourish in soft toys which are always found in babies and toddlers' rooms. Although these are not in the

cot or bed, you will find them either on a shelf or in the toy basket. Soft toys need to be cleaned monthly. When you wash them at 100 degrees C to completely kill all the dust mites, they will be totally deformed.

A GOOD TIP: Put soft toys in a lockable or sealable bag and put them in the deep freezer overnight... In the morning shake them out properly outside and hang them on the washing line in the sun for the day. They will then be DUST MITE FREE.

NASAL CONGESTION IS NOT A SYMPTOM OF A COW'S MILK PROTEIN ALLERGY AT ALL! It is not recommended to change the formula to a soy based one.

Symptoms of a food allergy:

- Skin rash and in the case of Cow's Milk Protein Allergy (CMPA) weeping eczema
- Diarrhoea
- Wheezing
- Swelling of the face
- Dark circles under the eyes
- Prolonged face due to permanent mouth breathing

Advice:

Antihistamines are not suitable for babies and young children because they reduce the body's allergic response.

Enlarged Adenoids

Adenoids and tonsils are glandular tissue near the entrances to the breathing passages and can definitely cause NASAL OBSTRUCTION. Although the tonsils are visible when looking into a child's throat, the profuse smell confirms the infection. Adenoids are not directly visible and are located behind the nose.

Both adenoids and tonsils filter out bacteria and viruses. They sometimes become infected by the germs they are trying to eliminate and then become sore and swollen.

Adenoids generally get larger between birth and 4 years of age and then become progressively smaller. In severe cases they completely block the nasal passages and cause sleep disturbances.

Development of fluid in the middle ear (glue ear) is in some cases associated with enlarged adenoids.

Signs and symptoms:

- Noisy nose breathing
- Mouth breathing
- Snoring in the early years
- Nasally speech as if the nostrils are pinched
- Sleep apnoea

Advice:

- The only treatment is to refer the child to an Ear Nose and Throat specialist
- NO antibiotics or other medication will cure this
- NO medication to clear up the fluid in the middle ear. This will only thicken the mucus which will contribute to more pressure on the Eustachian tube and will eventually lead to a myringotomy or even grommets. (medicine induced surgery)

Foreign bodies

This refers to any object that is NOT meant to be there that is placed in the area of the nose or throat. Small objects such as dried beans, beads, nuts, buttons, seeds, paper, foam rubber or even small batteries are occasionally put up their noses by children under the age of five. Many parents only become aware of the problem when their child develops symptoms. Children are often afraid to admit that they have put a foreign object into their nose.

Signs and symptoms

- Only one nostril is affected
- Bloody discharge from the nose or ear
- Smelly discharge, green or yellow from the nose or ear
- Nose may become tender and swollen

Advice:

- If you can SEE it, REMOVE it
- Don't poke and prod with tweezers as you may push the object further back
- If the child is old enough, encourage him to blow his nose, while you press down on the clear nostril so there is more pressure behind the blocked nostril
- If removed successfully and a smelly discharge is present due to inflamed surrounding tissue the toddler may need an antibiotic nasal ointment or drops

Overuse of nasal sprays

Overuse of decongestant nasal sprays worsens NASAL CONGESTION. Prolonged use of over-the-counter nasal decongestion sprays may damage the delicate tissue in the nose and sinuses. This can also cause rebound congestion and inflammation.

Advice:

- Refer to a doctor if the infant is less than three months old and has signs of a cold or flu
- Emphasise the importance not to use the prescribed decongestant nasal spray by the doctor or paediatrician for longer than five days

Treatment for NASAL CONGESTION**Saline drops**

- This is the most effective for babies under the age of one year

Vaporisers and humidifiers

- Cool-mist vaporisers or humidifiers add moisture to the dry air
- Moist air eases stuffy nasal passages
- Vaporiser fluids that are appropriate for the use in both babies and young children may be beneficial
- Humidifiers and vaporisers need to be cleaned daily. Germs and mould breed in them, which are then circulated through the air for the infant and young child to breathe in

TIP: In areas in South Africa where water is "hard" (no foaming when using soap), a pinch of table salt can be added in the water to "soften" it and to provide more steam.

Nasal aspirators

- Bulb syringe – Always first apply saline drops in each nostril before it is used to remove extra mucous
- Parent powered nasal aspirator – one end of the tube is placed into the stuffed nostril, the other end goes in the mouth of the person that will perform the suction. That person needs to take a quick, deep breath through the mouth, which will suck the mucous into the receptor
- Electric nasal aspirators – Battery operated as well as models attached to your vacuum cleaner are available and very effective. Saline drops must always accompany the use of these devices.

Take home message

- NASAL CONGESTION is NOT a condition, it is a SYMPTOM of a condition
- NASAL CONGESTION is NOT always due to an illness
- OTC medications only treat the symptom, but do NOTHING to treat the cause
- Refer to a doctor if the baby or the young child is – Having trouble breathing or wheezing – Running a fever of 38°C and above, especially a baby under the age of three months

PHARMACISTS play a very important role in terms of guidance, education and advice in every client's life entering his pharmacy!