Addicted to nasal spray? [1]

Dear Alice,

I have been using nasal sprays for several years. It is the only thing that works for me on my swollen nasal passages. I've been to many doctors for this problem. I have yet to find one who can help me. I know that it is a bad idea to use nasal sprays for such a long time, but without it, I would not be able to breathe with my nose. I would love to get my nasal problem solved for good. I have had this problem all of my life and it is getting old.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Two squirts up each nostril might seem like the best prevention against mucho mucus and swelling, but when used over the long haul, nasal sprays can actually make runny noses and congestion worse. Over-the-counter nasal sprays ? the nasal decongestant or medicated kind ? work by constricting the blood vessels in the nose, reducing swelling, irritation, and sniffling. As swelling in the nasal passages decreases, you have more room to get air in, and quick as a sniff, that uncomfortable stuffy head feeling is gone. But, when the spray wears off, blood vessels dilate again, bringing swelling and congestion with the extra blood flow. This is when most folks reach for the spray bottle again... and again.

Unfortunately, with continuous use, medicated nasal sprays can cause "rebound rhinitis," a condition where nasal passages become even more swollen than they were originally. Long-term use can lead to around-the-clock congestion (it sounds as though this might be what has happened to you). Overuse of nasal sprays can also raise heart rate and blood pressure levels. For these reasons, the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology [2] advises against using over-the-counter nasal sprays for more than three or four days in a row.

Since you've been using nasal sprays for several years, you may want to get help in finding a spray-free solution to curing what ails you. Have you considered what may be causing the congestion in the first place? Common allergens like dust mites, pollen, mold, or animal dander? Certain foods you eat regularly? Chronic cold symptoms? If you explain your symptoms to your health care provider, s/he may be able to prescribe a prescription decongestant (in non-spray form) to keep your head clear while you wean yourself off of nasal sprays. S/he may also want to refer you to an ear, nose, and throat specialist (a.k.a., an Otolaryngologist or E.N.T.) or an allergist, who can address any underlying issues causing your congestion.
Other possible solutions to cope with a fresh case of marathon nose (one that can run all day without stopping), include using a non-medicated saline nasal spray that can moisturize and shrink nasal passages (and is not addictive), or taking a steam bath and/or shower that can often loosen mucus. Saline sprays are available at drug stores; look for the type without any medications or preservatives to keep from forming a new nasal-spray habit. Hopefully, one of these solutions will be the fix you need to keep you clear-headed.

Alice!
Category:
General Health [3]
Colds & Flu [4]

Related questions
Nasal spray junkie [5]
Naive nose-blower [6]
Allergies appear after relocation [7]
Red eyes [8]
Neti pot [9]
Can holding a sneeze cause damage? [10]

Resources
Medical Services (Morningside) [11]
Medical Services (CUMC) [12]
Published date:
Dec 20, 2001
Last reviewed on:
Jun 02, 2015

Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.

If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.