Dear Alice,

Do neti pots really work? My friend swears by it and says that it even clears out the worst congestion he’s ever had. If it does, do you have any tips of how to use it without making a huge, sticky mess? Thanks!

Just Trying to Breathe

Answer

Dear Just Trying to Breathe,

Though they may seem a little unorthodox and a little messier than just popping a nasal decongestant pill, "nasal irrigation" devices like Neti pots have been shown to relieve sinus pain and congestion when used alongside standard treatments. They do this by thinning the mucus in the nasal and sinus passages that cause the typical sniffling and discomfort that comes with a stuffy nose. This allows the mucus to clear more quickly.

Neti pots come from the Ayurvedic medical tradition, an ancient system of healing that originated in India. Neti pots look like they are part tea kettle, part magic lamp. Though instructions may vary from pot to pot, generally they are filled with a pint of lukewarm water and a teaspoon of salt. However, if you are using a water solution, it is extremely important that you only use *sterile* water— that is, water that has been boiled (and cooled), filtered water, or distilled water. Using tap water alone may put you at risk of contracting a deadly parasite.

To use the Neti pot, lean over a sink, with your head tilted at 45 degrees to the right or left. Insert the spout of the Neti pot into the top nostril, and slowly pour the saline solution (water + salt) into the nasal passage. The water will travel through the nasal and sinus cavities, and empty out through the other nostril and into the sink. Some of the solution may trickle into your throat, but just spit it out. This process is then repeated in the second nostril by tilting your head to the other side. Finish off with a good nose blow.

Neti pots work with the design of the human nasal and sinus cavities. These cavities are lined with lots of little hair-like structures called cilia that move around and help clear mucus buildup. Saline solutions like those used in Neti pots help the cilia move faster and thus, clear the mucus at a more rapid pace. Since saline solutions may cause irritation, nasal irrigation is usually only recommended for use three times a week. Some people even mix half a teaspoon of baking soda in the saline solution to make it gentler on the sensitive tissues of the
nasal and sinus cavities. If nosebleeds or irritation occur, reducing the salt content of the solution or using cooler water may help. Also, to avoid infections, thoroughly wash and dry nasal irrigation devices after each use.

With Neti pots, there is the possibility of "too much of a good thing." Although intermittent use may offer some benefits, daily nasal irrigation may actually leave you more susceptible to illness. Along with removing the not so great stuff, constant cleansing takes with it the natural defense mechanisms that live in nasal mucus. If you are considering using a Neti pot or trying out other methods of nasal irrigation, speaking with a health care provider may not only offer an opportunity to learn how to properly use this therapy, but also pinpoint the cause of your congestion and other potential remedies.

Whatever your preferred method of nasal decongestion, hopefully this response will help you breathe easier, sans mess, of course!

Alice!
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