

Relief for nasal congestion

What is nasal congestion?

Nasal congestion is when the passages in your nose get swollen or plugged up with mucus. Common symptoms of nasal congestion are a stuffy nose and pressure around the nose and face.

What causes nasal congestion?

Several things cause nasal congestion including allergies, colds caused by viruses, and bacterial sinus infections.

Do you have a cold?

Most of the time, nasal congestion is caused by a cold. A cold usually goes away with simple home treatment in 1 to 2 weeks.

Symptoms of a cold include:

- Runny nose, sneezing or congestion.
- Itchy, red, watery eyes.
- Headache.
- Face pain or tenderness.
- Pain when you bend over.
- Tooth pain.
- Change in sense of smell.
- Cough.

Do you have allergies?

Some people with nasal congestion have allergies (allergic rhinitis).

Allergy symptoms are much like cold symptoms, but aren't caused by a viral or bacterial illness. Allergy symptoms include nasal congestion, discharge, sneezing, and itchy, red, watery eyes.

Do you have a bacterial sinus infection?

Bacterial sinus infections (bacterial sinusitis) are much less common than colds.

Symptoms of a bacterial sinus infection include any symptoms that occur with a cold or symptoms that get worse after 7 days.

Can antibiotics help if you have nasal congestion?

Antibiotics are strong medicines that kill bacteria. They don't kill viruses that cause colds and flu. Nasal congestion usually develops when you have a cold, so taking antibiotics won't help.

Most bacterial sinus infections will get better without antibiotics. In fact, taking antibiotics when you don't need them can lead to antibiotic-resistant bacteria. This means that if you get an illness caused by bacteria, antibiotics won't work. Talk with your health care provider about if you should take antibiotics.

Home treatment

If you've been congested for less than 3 weeks, try the following home treatments. If you don't feel better in the next week, talk to your health care provider about other treatment options.

- Wash mucus out of your nasal passages with a saline solution. We don't recommend a bulb syringe for rinsing nasal passages. Bacteria can be left in the bulb even after rinsing it out.
If you use a neti pot, it must be cleaned thoroughly every time you use it.
 - To make saline solution for neti pot: Dissolve ¼ teaspoon salt and a pinch of baking soda in 1 cup warm water. Make sure the water isn't too hot. Hot water will irritate your nasal passages. You can store the saline solution in the refrigerator for up to a week.
- Get plenty of rest. If you can, stay home from work or school for the first couple of days of your cold or flu. This will help you get the rest you need.
- Drink plenty of clear liquids. Drink about 8 ounces every 2 hours. Hot drinks, soup, or spicy foods might help relieve congestion.
- Use a vaporizer or breathe moist, warm steam from a hot shower.
- If your nose is red and sore from rubbing with tissues, put petroleum jelly on the sore area.
- Take acetaminophen (Tylenol), aspirin (not recommended for people under 20 years), or ibuprofen for pain. **People under the age of 20 should not take aspirin as it has been linked to Reye's syndrome, a rare but dangerous disease.**
- Take decongestant pills or use a decongestant nasal spray. Don't use a decongestant nasal spray for more than 3 days. Longer use can make your symptoms worse.
- Don't take antihistamines unless your symptoms are caused by allergies.

For allergies

If you think your symptoms are from allergies, try an over-the-counter antihistamine to relieve itching, sneezing, and watery eyes. Use a single-ingredient antihistamine product (such as loratadine, chlorpheniramine, clemastine, or diphenhydramine). Antihistamines might cause drowsiness or interact with other drugs. Read the package carefully before taking any medication.

Other home treatments

Although there isn't strong scientific evidence to prove these are effective, the following home treatments might help:

- Vitamin C (about 1,500 mg a day) starting the first day of your cold. Studies show that this might shorten your cold by about half a day. Some multivitamins contain this amount of vitamin C.
- Zinc lozenges every 2-3 hours starting the first day you have cold symptoms. It isn't clear how well zinc works, but it may shorten cold symptoms by 3 days. Zinc often causes a bad taste and may cause nausea. Don't take zinc if you are pregnant. Topical zinc, such as Zicam spray, isn't recommended. Taking this type of zinc has been linked with a loss of smell.
- Echinacea (about 500 mg 3 times a day) might ease cold symptoms.
- **Warning:** Echinacea can have interactions with certain drugs. Be sure to talk to your pharmacist if you are taking other medications. Do not take echinacea if you are pregnant, have a weakened immune system, or are allergic to plants in the daisy family.
- Guaifenesin tablets (such as Mucinex) may help your cough. Try 600-1200 mg twice a day.

When should you call your doctor?

Call your doctor or the consulting nurse if you have:

- A severe headache or facial pain that doesn't go away with home treatment.
- A fever over 100.5°F for more than 3 days.
- Cold symptoms that don't improve after a week of home treatment.

For more information

The **Consulting Nurse Service** is available to Kaiser Permanente members with medical questions or concerns. Call 24 hours a day toll-free 1-800-297-6877.

The **Kaiser Permanente Resource Line** can provide information on a variety of health topics. Call weekdays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. 1-800-992-2279, or by e-mail at resource.l@ghc.org.

Visit the Health and Wellness Resources section on the **Kaiser Permanente website** at kp.org/wa for more information on a variety of health topics.