

ARE YOU ADDICTED TO NASAL SPRAY?

Decongestant sprays are only meant to be used for a few days, but are often relied on for months or years – to the detriment of your nose. Recovering “user” Sara Mulcahy reports

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Life can be pretty miserable with a blocked nose, and I don't mean just a bit of a sniffle, but full-on congestion – the kind that means you can't smell or taste, your voice sounds as if you have a bag on your head, you feel disconnected from conversations and, of course, you can't sleep. So if someone offers you instant relief, you'd be a fool not to take it, right?

More than \$250 million worth of cold, cough and flu remedies are sold in Australia every year. From powders and tablets to syrups and rubs, these products are used by most Aussies hoping for relief from their symptoms. And, according to the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, nasal spray accounts for an estimated \$40-50 million of that. Afrin, Vicks Sinex, Spray-Tish and Drixine are just a few that are available over the counter here. They clear a blocked nose within minutes and last for up to 12 hours. But there's a catch.

HOW NASAL SPRAYS WORK
“Decongestant nasal sprays work by shrinking the blood supply to the nose,” rhinologist and ear, nose and throat surgeon Dr Narinder

Singh says. “This reduces swelling in the lining of the nose and opens up the breathing passages.”

“But if they're used for more than a few days, there's a risk of 'rebound' congestion. After the spray wears off, the body sends extra blood to the nose, which then makes the nose feel more blocked than before. The temptation is to use the spray to clear this extra blockage. This sets up a cycle of usage, resulting in dependency or 'addiction'.”

John Bell, pharmacist and a spokesman for the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia warns that nasal decongestants shouldn't be used for more than four or five consecutive days. “That's why pharmacists suggest them for people suffering congestion as a result of a cold, rather than a long-term issue such as allergies,” he says. “They're good products if used properly, but some people get a little over-enthusiastic because they work so well.”

Decongestant sprays aren't to be confused with steroid nasal sprays, used to treat allergies; these aren't addictive and don't damage the lining of the nose.

FROM RELIEF TO RELIANCE

I was introduced to nasal spray by a friend who empathised with my bunged-up plight, the result of a cold that's lingering symptoms refused to go away. I can't recall if I was given advice when I bought it at the chemist; if I was, it went in one muffled ear and out the other. The results were incredible – I could breathe, I could hear and, best of all, I could sleep.

Two weeks later I was still using it and, as with any so-called addiction, I started to need more to get the same result. If I didn't use it, my nose was worse than ever. I went online to discover myriad tales of woe. There were forums full of people who'd been using it for decades and couldn't stop. People who had bottles of the stuff in every bag, pocket and drawer because the panic of being caught without was too terrible to contemplate.

“Dependency on decongestant sprays is a common problem; I see one or two patients a week with this,” Singh says. “If used for months or years, they can damage the lining of the nose – a condition called rhinitis medicamentosa.”

After a few months of my dependency, I knew I had to do something, so I stopped using it in one nostril. I had no medical evidence to support this at the time – it just made sense. I then booked a long weekend off work and chucked out the bottles I'd squirreled away so I wouldn't be tempted to cave in at night.

I had five unpleasant days of feeling bunged up with periods of relief and several sleepless nights before, slowly and miraculously, my nose started to clear for longer periods and, eventually, completely. It felt good. And I felt pretty silly that I'd got myself into this position in the first place. But it seems my problem was entry-level stuff.

“One patient wanted to show me how much spray he'd used over the past two years,” Singh says. “He brought in a bag to my office with nearly 300 empty bottles.”

Singh says the risk of dependency could be reduced by larger warning labels on the packaging, and selling it in smaller bottles. “This would force anyone using it for more than a few days to return to the pharmacy, where they could get further advice.”



GET OFF IT
Melbourne ear, nose and throat surgeon Stephen Kleid says going cold turkey on nasal spray rarely works. Here are his tips to kick the habit, slowly.

1. Take a nasal decongestant with pseudoephedrine or phenylephrine to ease congestion gently.
2. Ask your GP about a nasal steroid spray.
3. Swap to a children's decongestant spray as they're low irritant.

4. After 2-4 weeks, stop using the spray in one nostril. In another month, stop altogether.
5. In the next 1-2 months, reduce then stop the decongestant and steroid spray. If this doesn't work, you may require surgery.

\$50 million

THE AMOUNT THAT AUSTRALIANS SPEND ON NASAL SPRAYS EACH YEAR