

Health COLD & FLU

Surprising Reasons You're Always Congested

JANUARY 11, 2016 By BARBARA BRODY



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You aren't sick, and you're pretty sure you aren't allergic to anything. So why do you feel so stuffed up? While colds, flu, and allergies to pollen and pets are common congestion culprits, there are plenty of



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other reasons why you might be having trouble breathing through your nose. Here are six possible ones you should know about.

You're irritated by—but not allergic to—something in your environment.

About one-third of people who have inflammation in their nasal passages have what's called non-allergic rhinitis, meaning that an overactive immune system is not to blame. "If you've been tested for allergies and you're negative, that's probably what you have," says [Gerald B. Lee, MD](#), head of the division of allergy and immunology, department of pediatrics at the University of Louisville. One common form, [vasomotor rhinitis](#), tends to occur when your body is irritated by something like cigarette smoke, perfume, or dry air. Temperature fluctuations can also spell trouble. Your best bet is to try to figure out your triggers and avoid them as much as you can. If that doesn't help enough, ask your doctor about using a decongestant or a nasal spray containing an antihistamine or corticosteroid.

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Swollen belly aside, you go through an awful lot of changes while you're growing a baby. The hormonal shifts are major, plus there's more blood circulating throughout your body. While most people have heard that being pregnant can bring on swollen ankles, you might be surprised to learn that the [membranes in your nose may swell](#) as well. That can make you feel very stuffy even though you're not sick. (Nosebleeds are also common when you're expecting.) Running a humidifier, drinking plenty of fluids, and using a saline nasal spray can all help. Be sure to consult your ob-gyn before trying any OTC medication.

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You're suffering from rebound congestion.

A decongestant nasal spray (like Afrin) can work wonders when you're suffering from a bad [cold or allergies](#). But beware: If you don't follow the instructions on the bottle—you're not supposed to use it for more than 3 days—you could end up with so-called rebound congestion. That means you become reliant (some people say they're "addicted") to the medication and feel stuffier than ever when you try to discontinue it...so you end up using it again. Breaking the cycle isn't easy. "You'll feel awful for a while," says Lee, but it does eventually get better. If you can't manage to break the cycle on your own, talk to your doctor or an allergist: "Some people need to use oral or nasal steroid medications while they're getting off the nasal

decongestants."

You have an underactive thyroid.



Again, blame hormones. Hypothyroidism—a condition in which your body doesn't produce enough thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH)—can lead to nasal congestion, along with other symptoms like fatigue, constipation, thinning hair, dry skin, and feeling cold. (Here's how to tell [if your thyroid's out of whack](#).) If you suspect you might have this problem, ask your internist to check your TSH levels. Taking synthetic thyroid hormone medication (such as Levothroid or Synthroid) should help restore balance to your body.

You've developed a sinus infection.

Have a cold that just won't quit? Most viral infections, including colds, are on their way out within a week or two. If you've been sick

for longer than that—or if you feel like your cold started to diminish only to flare up again with a vengeance—see your doctor. You may have developed a bacterial sinus infection, which requires [treatment with antibiotics](#). Other signs of a bacterial infection include fever, nasal discharge that contains pus, and severe pain in the sinuses, says Lee.

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You have nasal polyps.

Another reason for a "cold" that never ends: polyps. These non-cancerous growths (which can occur in the [nose or sinuses](#)) aren't dangerous, but they can physically obstruct your sinuses or airways and make you feel pretty terrible. Polyps are most likely to crop up in people who have allergies, asthma, or chronic sinus infections. If you constantly feel like your nose is blocked and your senses of smell and taste have diminished, see a doctor to get checked out. Polyps can be removed, but they tend to grow back, says Lee. You might be better off using a nasal steroid spray, which can help shrink polyps and relieve your symptoms. Allergy or steroid medication may also be used to help prevent polyps that have been removed from returning.

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