

THE "INFO"-HALER



TAKE IN THE INFORMATION

An easy to understand, informative newsletter for our patients of all ages from the *Allergy & Asthma Associates of Michigan, P.C.*

DECONGESTANTS

Decongestants are the drugs to take when nasal stuffiness, sinus headaches/pressure, and congestion are the primary symptoms. During an allergic reaction, histamine is released from the mast cells. The histamine causes the blood vessels within the nose to dilate, thicken, and ooze mucous into the surrounding tissues. As a result, the surrounding tissues begin to swell. Nasal stuffiness occurs when the swelling of the lining of the nose reduces the size of the passageway for air to travel, resulting in a "plugged-up" feeling. Decongestants work to reduce the swelling in the nose by constricting the blood vessels and preventing further leakage. By reducing the swelling and mucus formation, they relieve the pressure of nasal congestion.

Decongestants are usually grouped into two general categories: topical and systemic. Topical decongestants are either sprayed or dropped into the nose and begin to work within minutes. Systemic decongestants are ingested in capsule, tablet, or liquid form and must be absorbed into the blood stream and circulated throughout the tissues to begin to work.

Topical decongestants are best used for temporary relief of nasal stuffiness or congestion. They are helpful in the treatment of congested nose and sinuses. When used safely and correctly, there are few side effects. In general, the safe way to use topical decongestants, unless directed otherwise by your physician, is to use the lowest effective dose for no more than three days at a time. If used for longer periods, they can become very addictive. Young children should not use topical decongestants.

Side effects of topical decongestants consist of burning or stinging in the nose, the sensation of dryness in the nose, and the most troublesome problem, rebound swelling or chemical rhinitis of the nasal lining, usually due to overuse. With chemical rhinitis, there is increased swelling of the lining of the nose whenever the effects of the nasal drops or sprays wear off. This is called rebound congestion and seemingly is only relieved by using more of the topical decongestant, creating a dependence. Common topical decongestants include Afrin, Dristan, and Sinex. Most topical decongestants contain Neo-Synephrine.

If you need a decongestant for longer than three days, systemic decongestants are the drugs of choice. They are used to treat congested noses, infected fluid filled ears, congested infected sinuses, and Eustachian tube malfunctions. Some people take them prophylactically before airplane travel to prevent ear problems occurring as a result of altitude adjustment. Most varieties of systemic decongestants are variations of two general products: pseudoephedrine and phenylephrine. Pseudoephedrine is the product most commonly used.

Since systemic decongestants circulate throughout the blood stream before reaching the nose, they have an opportunity to act on tissues throughout the body, and hence have more potential to cause side effects. Some of the side effects associated with systemic decongestants are sleeplessness, shakiness, hyperactivity, increased blood pressure (in people who have that tendency), increased heart rate, nausea, and even headaches. Decongestants should be avoided, unless otherwise directed by your physician, during pregnancy, while nursing, and with hypertension, heart problems, enlarged prostate, diabetes mellitus, and hyperthyroidism. Decongestants should be used cautiously with many other medications. Be sure your physician always knows all the medications you are taking.

Systemic decongestants can be purchased over the counter or by prescription. The best known over the counter product is Sudafed (plain pseudoephedrine).

Decongestants can also be purchased in combination with other drugs such as antihistamines, pain relievers, mucous thinners, or cough suppressants. In general, you should choose an antihistamine when your symptoms consist of runny nose, sneezing, post-nasal drip, and itchy nose. You should choose a decongestant when your symptoms consist of nasal congestion or stuffiness. If you have a combination of symptoms, then you should choose a combination antihistamine/decongestant product.

There are numerous prescription and over the counter decongestant and decongestant combination products on the market, and more are becoming available every day. Medication selection and management should always be directed by your physician.

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