NASAL IRRIGATIONS: WHY AND HOW

The nasal and sinus cavities are normally able to clear mucus on their own through muco-ciliary transport. Sometimes swelling of the nose from allergy, irritation, or infection can prevent this self-cleansing. In these cases, irrigation (also called nasal flushing or washing) can be used until the lining of the nose can recover and return to normal. A normal nose can produce up to 2 liters of mucus PER DAY. So seeing mucus during your irrigation does not necessarily indicate infection.

Saline irrigation is different from saline spray (for example Ocean spray) and provides several major benefits. It acts as a solvent, cleansing the nasal cavities of mucus, crusts, and other debris. It acts as a decongestant because of the salt content and pulls fluid from the nasal tissues. This helps to decrease swelling, open sinus passages, and increase nasal air flow. Also, it helps return the nose to a normal state by providing moisture, improving normal mucus transport, and cilia function which can improve drainage.

Warm saline is preferred as it is more comfortable, however you may use room temperature if desired. You can purchase a ready made saline irrigation product such as NeilMed or Ayr at most pharmacies. Our office recommends the squirt bottle type with 200ml volume. Alternately, you can make your own solution according to the directions below. The amount of salt you add will depend on your individual tolerance. However, the closer to 3 tsp of salt you add the better the decongestant effect. The bicarbonate acts as a buffer to make the salt less irritating.

If you are also using a nasal steroid spray like Nasonex, Veramyst, Nasacort, or Flonase (fluticasone) you should always irrigate prior to using your spray. The nasal steroid sprays are all most effective when sprayed onto clean membranes and into open passages allowing it to travel farther into the sinus cavity.

Solution Preparation:

1. Clean a 1-quart glass jar carefully and then fill it with bottled or distilled water. Please do not use tap water! You need not boil the water.
2. Add 2-3 heaping teaspoons of pickling or canning salt. DO NOT USE TABLE SALT! It contains too many additives.
3. Add 1 rounded teaspoon of baking soda (pure bicarbonate).
4. Store at room temperature and shake or stir before each use.
5. Mix a new batch weekly.

To Use:

1. Pour some of the mixture into a clean bowl. Warm the solution to body temperature, but be sure it is NOT TOO HOT.
2. Fill irrigation device. To avoid contamination, DO NOT PLACE BULB OR SYRINGE INTO JAR. You should use about ¼ cup of solution per side.
3. Stand over sink or in shower. Breathe through your mouth (in order to close off your nose) and squirt the mixture into one nostril until the solution comes out of the other nostril or your mouth. Aim the stream of saline as though you are squirting towards the BACK of your head, NOT the top. Repeat 2-3 times EACH nostril.
4. Rinse the nose 2-3 times daily or as directed by your physician.