

DECONGESTANTS

What Will Decongestants Do For Me?

The main action of decongestants is to unstop your nose.

How Do They Work?

Decongestants cause the blood vessels in the nose to shrink. There is less blood flow to the nose, and this reduces the swelling. With less swelling, you can breathe easier.

How Do I Take Them?

They may be taken by mouth as a liquid, tablet, or capsule, or by nose as a spray.

What About Side Effects?

Decongestants have a stimulant effect which may cause restlessness, dizziness, hyperactivity or nausea. In general, decongestants are very safe. If you have heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, or thyroid problems, you should be careful about using them. If you have any of these problems, be sure to discuss this with the doctor.

What Else Should I Know?

Drug interactions: If you are taking any of the drugs known as "tricyclic antidepressants," you should discuss this with the doctor before taking decongestants.

Other uses: While antihistamines are useful only for allergies, decongestants may be helpful for a number of complaints. They are used when people have colds to "unstuff" the nose and can also be used to stop the "popping" in your ears when you fly or dive.

Rebound and habituation: If you use a decongestant nose spray for more than three days in a row, you may come to feel that you "need" it in order to breathe normally. This is called habituation. It happens because the spray makes your nose more open than normal. Therefore, when you stop using the spray your nose often overcompensates and "rebound" congestion occurs causing you to use the spray. Do not use decongestant nasal sprays for over three days unless instructed by the doctor. Other classes of nasal sprays such as cromolyn sodium (Nasal crom) or corticosteroid sprays (Nasalide, Beconase, Vancenase, Nasacort) can be used routinely without fear of rebound congestion.

Cross contamination: If you use a nasal spray when you have a cold, germs are in contact with the nosepiece. The germs can live there and even in the spray, until the next time the product is used. Therefore, it is unwise for people to share nose sprays. It is also unwise to keep a bottle of nose spray once your cold is gone. The spray should be thrown away when you are finished using it if you used it for an infection.