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Hey Doc! I've got this awful post-nasal drip!

Lots of us complain about post-nasal drip. So let's look at where it comes from and what it is. Glands in our nose and throat produce between one and two quarts of mucus every day. That mucous moistens and cleans our nasal membranes, humidifies air, traps inhaled foreign matter, and fights infection. Normally, we just swallow that mucous unconsciously. But when we feel mucous accumulating in our throat, or dripping from the back of our nose, that's post-nasal drip.

Now let's look at what causes post-nasal drip: Increased thin, clear secretions can be caused by colds, flu, allergies, cold temperature, bright lights, certain foods or spices, pregnancy, and other hormonal changes. They can be caused by birth control pills and high blood pressure medications. Finally, they can be caused by a deviated nasal septum. Increased thick secretions can be caused by insufficient moisture in heated buildings and homes, especially during winter, aging, and exposure to irritants such as cigarette smoke and industrial fumes. They can also be caused by infections in our sinuses or nose, and some allergies, especially to foods such as dairy products. If thin secretions become thick and green or yellow, it's likely that a bacterial infection is developing. Thick secretions from one side of a child's nose can mean that a foreign body, such as a wad of paper or a piece of toy, is stuck there. Finally, swallowing problems may complicate or feel like post-nasal drip.

OK, now, what do we do about it? Here are some measures that are safe and that all of us can use: First let's thin out those secretions. And the best way to do that is by hydrating from within. That means drinking lots and lots and lots of fluids. The best fluid is water; and try to avoid caffeine. Amounts required surprise most of us: We recommend drinking half of your body weight—in ounces of water—every day. For a 150-pound person, that's 75 ounces, which is 2 ½ quarts—every day! Mucous-thinning agents, now available without a prescription, such as Mucinex and Robitussin, will also help.

Antihistamines and decongestants seem to cause more problems than they solve. Antihistamines may make us drowsy or interfere with urination in older men. Decongestants may cause jitters, insomnia, heart palpitations, and blood pressure elevations. And besides, antihistamines and decongestants thicken the very secretions that we're trying to thin.

Nasal irrigation with saline solutions, two to four times daily, often help. Make the stuff yourself with warm water and one teaspoon of baking soda or salt to a pint (16 ounces) of water. Or else get one of the many commercial preparations such as Ocean®, Ayr®, or Nasal®, or Alkalol®. Hypertonic saline solutions have become quite the rage lately. But they make no sense against the laws of physics, and I've seen a few cases of bleeding that they caused. Netti pots have been getting lots of good press. While very clumsy and perhaps uncomfortable to use, some very reliable folk absolutely swear by them.

As we've just seen, post-nasal drip may come from a bunch of causes. Some require antibiotics, nasal steroid or other prescription nasal sprays, oral steroids, or medications to treat reflux. Some may even require surgery. Properly determining the cause requires a detailed exam of our ear, nose, and throat. So if you develop a persistent post-nasal drip, call Dr. Selkin.