

A watercolor illustration of a woman with a large, long, blue nose. She is wearing a brown hood, a green sweater, and a white apron. She is holding a broom and sniffing a bouquet of flowers. The background is white with scattered flowers and tools like scissors and a pencil.

# something to SNIFF about

CLEAR THE AIR  
BEHIND FIVE COMMON  
SITUATIONS WHEN  
YOUR NOSE ACTS UP.

BY NG MEI YAN  
ILLUSTRATION BY  
MINDFLYER+FEI

Don't be caught  
out by the cold.



## No one bats an eyelid at catching the sniffles.

But when is a common cold not so common? And just how well do you understand your nasal health? “We take our nose for granted even though we use it 17,000 to 25,000 times a day for breathing,” says Dr Kenny Pang, ear nose and throat consultant at the Pacific Sleep Centre. In fact, our nose is like our body’s built-in air purifier and humidifier; it filters particles out, and also moisturises and warms the air we breathe. That’s when your nose does its job. But when it goes on strike, the problems can hit us hard. Throbbing headaches, face pain, and fatigue are just a fraction of the symptoms your nose can bring about. To tell us what could be causing those sniffles and more, we turn to the experts for help.

## \*1 I GET THE SNIFFLES EVERYTIME I CLEAN THE HOUSE

### IT COULD BE Allergic rhinitis

Up to 13 per cent of our local population has this condition, also known as hay fever. It can cause cold-like symptoms such as sneezing, and a blocked and runny nose. Unlike a cold, however, allergic rhinitis is not caused by a virus, and neither does it cause throat irritation, muscle ache or fatigue. As its name suggests, it is an allergy to certain substances in your environment — most commonly house dust mites or pollen.

“When someone with allergic rhinitis inhales the allergens, the immune system releases chemicals that cause all those symptoms,” says Dr Chan Kwai Onn, consultant ear, nose and throat surgeon at Changi General Hospital.

**GET RELIEF** Keep a trigger journal to help you pinpoint what allergens you react to, suggests Dr Chan. To confirm the allergens, a skin prick test or blood test called Rast (Radioallergen sorbent Test) can be done.

Allergic rhinitis can be treated with anti-histamines, steroid nasal sprays, the short-term use of decongestants, and immunotherapy — a treatment to desensitise your body to allergens, given either via injection or dripped under the tongue. Unfortunately, genes also play a major part in determining allergic rhinitis.

What you can do: avoid the allergen. If dust mites are the source of your blight, reducing their numbers in your environment can help.



“WATCH YOUR WEIGHT TO AVOID HYPERTENSION AND DIABETES. THEY CAN CAUSE POOR SINUS HEALTH.”

## \*2 I'M PREGNANT AND MY NOSE DRIPS CONSTANTLY

### IT COULD BE Rhinitis of Pregnancy

As if being bloated in the tummy is not enough, being pregnant can also get you bloated in the nose. Because of increased hormone levels, pregnant women often have symptoms of nasal congestion and runny nose, says Dr Chan. The increased amount of oestrogen causes your mucous membranes to swell and produce more mucus than usual. Your blood vessels also expand during your pregnancy and that can give you swollen nasal membranes.

Rhinitis of pregnancy usually starts in the first trimester and doesn't resolve until two weeks before delivery, says Dr Chan. The nasal symptoms are also sometimes accompanied by headaches.

**GET RELIEF** Take special caution when treating

rhinitis of pregnancy as certain drugs can cause possible complications. Safe treatments include nasal saline irrigations, which involves rinsing out the nasal passage with a salt-water solution, and some antihistamines like loratadine or chlorpheniramine.

Avoid oral decongestants (such as pseudoephedrine or phenylephrine) as they may narrow blood vessels in the placenta and reduce blood flow to the foetus. Also steer clear of certain antihistamines like triamcinolone, which may cause birth defects. “In the end, the best treatment for rhinitis of pregnancy is the delivery of the baby,” says Dr Chan.

## \*3 YOU HAVE COLD-LIKE SYMPTOMS FOR THE LAST THREE MONTHS

### IT COULD BE Chronic Sinusitis

You wake up sneezing, your face aches, your head throbs, and mucus just can't seem to stop running down the back of your throat. Sounds like a cold? Almost, except it's been going on for far too many weeks.

The reason? Our sinuses are pairs of hollow spaces around your nose, eyes and in your cheekbones. Sinusitis occurs when these spaces become infected by bacteria, fungus or a virus. This causes air, pus and mucus trapped in there to put pressure on the sinus walls, and result in pain. Also, thick pus accumulated in the sinuses can flow out and down the throat, irritating it, says Dr Kevin Soh, consultant ear, nose and throat surgeon at Mount Elizabeth Hospital. The uncontrollable coughing at night? That's your choked sinuses complaining.

The condition can be acute (lasts less than two weeks), or chronic (drags on for more than three months). While acute sinusitis is often caused by the cold virus and goes away after a couple of weeks, chronic sinusitis can be brought on by many factors, including problems in the sinus structure, air pollution and poor ventilation, says Dr Soh.

**GET RELIEF** Sinusitis can be an annoying, and sometimes, crippling condition, but there are ways to reduce the chances of an attack. For a start, avoid cigarette smoke and other allergens. “If you are allergic to cats and dogs, then you may have to do without them as pets,” says Dr Soh. Upper respiratory tract infections (such as a flu) can also cause sinusitis. Your best bet? A healthy nose needs a healthy body, so sleep well, exercise, and maintain a healthy

diet rich in fruits, vegetables and antioxidants to boost your immunity.

Medications to treat sinusitis include antibiotics to treat the bacterial infection, nasal sprays to reduce swelling and widen the sinus opening, and heartburn medications if your swelling is caused by the backflow of acid from the stomach into the nose. If all else fails, surgery can be carried out to unblock the sinuses and to correct any structural problems. The latest non-invasive therapy, balloon sinuplasty, can also be carried out together with endoscopic sinus surgery (ESS) to treat chronic sinusitis. It works by using a small, inflated balloon to stretch the blocked sinuses open.

## \*4 YOUR NOSE BLEED FOR NO RHYME OR REASON

### IT COULD BE A Deviated Septum

It means the wall between your nostrils is shifted to one side, making airflow uneven. And get this: as many as 80 per cent of the population has a deviated septum either from birth or injury.

“If the nasal septum is deviated, air will have to flow faster through the narrowed side. This rapid air flow can cause trauma and nose bleeds,” explains Dr Soh. At the same time, the faster air flow reduces the air pressure in the nasal cavity, allowing the blood vessels to expand. “Like a fully inflated balloon, an enlarged blood vessel is more likely to rupture and bleed,” he says.

Nose bleeds should not happen in adults at all because, unlike in children, our blood vessel walls are thicker and less prone to injury. So it is important that your nose is carefully evaluated as it could be a sign of early stage cancer.

**GET RELIEF** Most cases of deviated septum do not cause any major problems; you may not even know you have it. But if it is causing symptoms like blocked nose, pain, bleeding and blocked sinus openings, the condition can be corrected by surgery. If picking your nose causes it to bleed, then stop traumatising your nasal tissue, says Dr Soh. Instead, gently clean out your nose with tissue paper or consider a saline nasal wash or douche.

Nose bleeds can have underlying causes like allergies, blocked nose or hypertension (high blood pressure increases stress on your blood vessels, causing them to burst). To be safe, consult your doctor at the earliest possible time when your nose bleeds.

## \*5 YOU SEEM TO BE LOSING YOUR SENSE OF SMELL

### IT COULD BE Nasal Polyps

These are abnormal swellings that grow in your nose or sinuses. Experts don't know what causes them but they've been linked to chronic nasal inflammation and infection, and genes. These growths usually develop in the nose cavity and obstruct breathing and smell, explains Dr Pang. Some of these polyps can become big enough to block the entire cavity and even protrude out of the nose, says Dr Pang. Nasal polyps are common and can occur together with chronic sinusitis or allergic rhinitis. Large polyps not only affect your sense of smell and block your nose, you may even get headaches, snoring and cause mucus to flow down the back of your throat.

**GET RELIEF** Oral and topical nasal steroid medications (corticosteroids) are the primary therapy of choice, says Dr Pang. They help to reduce inflammation in the nose, improve airflow and can shrink the polyps.

If medication doesn't work, there's always the option of surgery. Surgical polypectomy — an outpatient procedure that uses a mechanical device to remove polyp tissues — is good for isolated or small numbers of polyps. Alternatively, ESS not only removes polyps but also opens the clefts in the nose where polyps most often form. This helps to decrease the recurrence rate. “Sometimes, tumours or cancer of the nose may be mistaken as polyps,” says Dr Pang, “Suspected cases should be referred to an ENT specialist for assessment.”



“NOSE BLOCKED? TRY INHALING STEAM FROM HOT SHOWERS AND SOUPS TO CLEAR YOUR NASAL PASSAGEWAYS.”