Topical decongestants

What are topical decongestants?

Nasal decongestants work by constricting the dilated blood vessels in the nasal mucosa. The nasal membranes are effectively shrunk, so drainage of mucus and breathing are improved while the feeling of nasal stuffiness is relieved. The decongestant effects of topical products containing oxymetazoline or xylometazoline are longer lasting (up to 6 hours) than those of some other preparations e.g. ephedrine or phenylephrine.

When should topical decongestants be used?

Decongestant nasal drops and sprays are available over-the-counter for the short-term treatment of nasal congestion associated with colds and flu and sinusitis. These products are only recommended for up to 5 days' use as rebound congestion can occur with longer term use. Topical decongestants are a suitable alternative to oral decongestants in patients with high blood pressure or thyroid problems since these medicines are unlikely to affect blood pressure or thyroid function. Spray may be preferred to drops, as the risk of swallowing the medication, with resultant systemic effects, is less. Metered-dose sprays also prevent overdosage.

Who should not use a topical decongestant?

Although the risk is much greater with oral decongestants, topical decongestants should be used with caution in patients with diabetes, heart disease, uncontrolled high blood pressure or overactive thyroid.

Are there any medicines that can interact with the topical decongestants?

Although the risk is much greater with oral decongestants, topical decongestants should best be avoided in patients taking monoamine-oxidase-type antidepressants, beta-blockers or tricyclic antidepressants.

Are there any side effects from topical decongestants?

Topical decongestants are only minimally absorbed from the nasal mucosa, so the risk of side effects is small. Patients should be counselled that the products should not be used for longer than 5 days. Side effects associated with oral decongestants may occur in some patients e.g. headache, palpitations, restlessness, tremor, sleep disturbances and anxiety.

References

1. Blenkinsopp A, Paxton P, Blenkinsopp J. Symptoms in the Pharmacy. 6th Ed. Wiley-Blackwell. 2009. pp192-195.
2. South African Medicines Formulary 9th Ed. 2010.