Stuffiness or nasal congestion occurs when the nasal mucosa swells and produces mucus in response to dry air, dust or other irritant particles such as smoke or perfume.\(^1\)

An infant is considered to be any baby from birth to the age of 12 months, and at this stage of their life, a baby needs to be able to suckle.\(^2\) A baby who is very congested may not be able to suck easily as they are also trying to breathe through their mouth as they feed. They are then not able to feed properly and become hungry and miserable.\(^1\)

### Treatment

A blocked nose in a baby does not require treatment if the infant can feed and is otherwise well.\(^3\)

General measures to improve a blocked nose:

- A bowl of warm water placed in the baby’s room will help to increase the humidity.\(^3\)
- Sitting with the baby in the bathroom while a hot shower is running may help clear the infant’s nose (Note: sit in the bathroom, NOT in the hot shower!).\(^1,3\)
- Use a humidifier or vaporiser in the baby’s room.\(^1\)
- Gentle taps on the baby’s back can ease congestion. Either lay the baby across your knees or let him sit up, with his body leaning forward, as you gently pat his back with a cupped hand. This helps to loosen any mucus in the chest so that it can be coughed up.\(^4\)

### Nasal drops

Saline (salt water) drops and sprays are available and are safe to use for infants. Saline thins the mucus and makes it easier for the baby to clear it from the nose. The baby should be placed on their back, with a towel under their shoulders. Then, two to three drops of saline can be placed in each nostril. After 30 to 60 seconds the baby can be placed on their stomach to allow the nose to drain. The infant may cough or sneeze to clear the mucus. Excess saline or mucus can be wiped with a tissue. Cotton swabs or ear buds should NOT be used inside a baby’s nose.\(^1,3,4\)

### Nasal aspirators

Nasal aspirators or nasal suction bulbs can be used with saline drops. This helps to remove the moistened mucus. The aspirator is used as follows:

- Squeeze the bulb
- Place the tip gently against the baby’s nostril, just inside the nostril (not deep in the nose)
- Release the bulb slowly, suctioning the mucus
- Release mucus into a tissue
- Rinse the bulb with soapy water after each use\(^1,4\)

### When to see a doctor

Blocked noses in infants are generally self-limiting and not a cause for concern. However, a doctor should be consulted if the baby displays any of the following:

- A fever (temperature over 38 °C)
- Stuffy nose for longer than two weeks, or with swelling around the nose, eyes or cheeks
- Difficulty breathing
• Significant trouble feeding
• Extreme fussiness or seems to be in pain

Conclusions

Nasal congestion may occur when the nasal mucosa is exposed to dry air or other irritants. Babies may often experience blocked noses but this is not usually a problem if they are otherwise well and can feed. A doctor should be consulted if saline drops are not able to clear the nose or if the infant has other symptoms.

References