



## Catarrh

### What is 'catarrh'?

Catarrh is very common but very difficult to describe. It means different things to different people. Some people use the term to describe a feeling of mucus (snot) at the back of their nose. Others use it to describe a build-up of mucus in their throat. For some, it simply means feeling that they keep needing to clear their throat.

Catarrh is not clearly described in medical textbooks. The word comes from ancient Greek and means 'to flow down'.

People with catarrh experience the feeling most of the time and often for many years. Most people will get a bit of catarrh when they have a cold or flu. This usually clears away quite quickly. People with chronic or long-lasting catarrh usually describe feeling like they have a constant cold but without any of the other symptoms.

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### Two Types of Catarrh

There seem to be two types of catarrh.

- Some patients experience catarrh as an excess of mucus that runs out of their nose. This is known as rhinitis.
- Other patients experience the same feeling of an excess of mucus but can't clear anything out of their nose or their throat. This can be frustrating.

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### What causes catarrh?

Catarrh doesn't seem to be caused by allergies. It is not due to anything unusual about the way mucus is transported inside the nose. It is possible that catarrh could be more due to **an issue with the feeling in the lining of the back of the nose and the throat**. This may explain why so many patients find it difficult to spit out the mucus that they sense at the back of the throat.

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### What are the symptoms of catarrh?

Catarrh is linked with a lot of other symptoms. As well as the feeling of mucus at the back of the nose or throat, or a constant need to clear the throat, patients may notice other symptoms. These include:

- a feeling of having a blocked nose
- not being able to blow their nose well

- discomfort in the throat
  - a crackling or dragging feeling in the ears
  - a feeling of choking or something stuck in the throat
  - a constant cough or feeling sick.
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## How is catarrh diagnosed?

There is no diagnostic test for catarrh given that it is not evidently due to an actual disease. When people are said to have catarrh, it is based only on a sensation that they feel. We know from research that tests for allergy, tests of mucus flow and CT x-ray scans of the sinuses are not helpful in the management of people who experience chronic catarrh.

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## What can I do to help myself?

**Self-help** is an important part of managing your catarrh. The feeling of mucus in the back of your nose or throat may have more to do with the lining of your nose or throat than any mucus buildup. And although catarrh patients often find their condition frustrating, mucus is not in any way harmful to the body.

Clearing your throat all the time can make you feel worse. Try to avoid this – sipping iced water can help reduce the urge. Some patients report that avoiding dairy products in their diet can help, although there is no research at the moment to say for certain.

Over-the-counter catarrh cures are okay to try but many people find these unhelpful.

Unfortunately, chronic catarrh does seem to be a problem that affects people for many years of their life, whatever remedies they try. It is worth finding ways to manage your symptoms, rather than looking for a cure. Salt water nasal rinses can reduce the symptoms of catarrh and are simple to make and apply.

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## How is catarrh treated?

Unfortunately, there is no cure for chronic catarrh. Catarrh patients who also have a runny nose may benefit from a steroid nasal spray. Those who do not have a runny nose do not usually find such sprays helpful. On the whole, antibiotics don't seem to help.

Some patients report that simple remedies such as saline nasal rinses can help relieve their symptoms. These can be made at home or purchased over the counter at a pharmacist. They need to be used regularly (3 or 4 times per day) and over a long period – for as long as they provide benefit.

Homeopathy practitioners often have an interest in managing catarrh. However, there are no reliable studies to say whether or not homeopathy can work for catarrh.

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## How would your doctor monitor your condition?

Because chronic catarrh affects people for so long without any real change in their symptoms, your doctor may not feel it necessary to monitor you for this problem. That doesn't mean that they don't believe your symptoms are real, only that the symptoms don't indicate anything more serious. If you have new

symptoms, you should let your doctor know. These could include a blocked nose, runny nose, weak sense of smell, sinus pain, sore throat, a change in your voice or difficulty swallowing.

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## Uncertainties

There is a lot of uncertainty around chronic catarrh. This ranges from what it is to what causes it, which makes it difficult for doctors to manage. It is important to be aware of this when looking online for treatment or cures. Many websites claim to be able to cure catarrh, but there is very little evidence to back up these claims. Bear in mind that if these treatments worked, they would almost certainly be available on the NHS.

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