

## ENT Conditions and Procedures

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### Catarrh

#### What is ‘catarrh’?

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Catarrh is a condition that is very common but yet very difficult to describe well. It means different things to different people.

- Some people use the term catarrh to describe a feeling of mucus at the back of their nose.
- Others use it to describe a build up of phlegm in their throat and for some it simply means the continuous desire to clear their throat.

Catarrh is not even well defined in the medical textbooks – except to say that the term comes from ancient Greek times and literally means ‘to flow down’.

What we do know about people who suffer from catarrh is that they experience the sensation most of the time and often for many years. Most people will get a degree of catarrh when they have a cold or flu, but this usually clears away quite quickly. People with chronic or long standing catarrh usually describe the feeling of having a constant cold but without any of the other symptoms of a cold.

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#### Two Types of Catarrh

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There appears to be two types of catarrh.

- There are some patients who experience catarrh with an excess of mucus that actually runs out of their nose (known as ‘rhinitis’).
- There are other patients, however, who experience the same sensation of an excess of mucus but are unable to clear anything out of their nose or their throat. This can be frustrating for them.

#### What causes catarrh?

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Research suggests that catarrh is not related to allergy, nor is it due to any abnormality of the way mucus is transported within the nose. It is possible that the catarrh may be due more to an abnormality of 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 are sensing at the back of the throat.

#### What are the symptoms of catarrh?

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Catarrh is associated with a great number of other symptoms. Apart from the sensation of mucus at the back of the nose or throat, or of a persistent desire to clear the throat, patients may also notice other symptoms. These include:

- a sensation of nasal congestion,
- ineffective nose blowing,
- throat discomfort,
- crackling or dragging sensation in the ears,
- a sensation of choking or something stuck in the throat,
- a constant cough or of feeling sick.

#### How is catarrh diagnosed?

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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.

#### What can I do to help myself?

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Self-help is probably the most important part of managing your catarrh. It is worth bearing in mind that although you have the intense feeling of phlegm in the back of your nose or throat, it is quite possible that this is more to do with the feeling within the lining rather than an actual build up of mucus. Furthermore, although catarrh patients often find their condition “frustrating” and “disgusting”, it is worth remembering that mucus is not in any way harmful to the body.

Persistent throat clearing often becomes a vicious cycle whereby the action of clearing your throat actually worsens and perpetuates the situation. It is therefore worth trying to avoid clearing your throat and you may find sipping iced water useful in suppressing the urge to do so. Some patients report an improvement in their symptoms from avoiding dairy products in their diet although there is no research at the moment to say whether or not this is truly beneficial.

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 regardless of the remedies that they try. It is therefore worth finding ways to adapt to your symptoms and ways to lessen them, rather than looking for a fix or a cure. Salt water nasal rinses are helpful for lessening the symptoms of catarrh and are simple to make and administer.

#### How is catarrh treated?

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There are unfortunately no cures for chronic catarrh. It is quite possible that those catarrh sufferers who also have runny nose will 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 do not seem to be helpful.

Simple remedies such as saline nasal rinses, which can be made at home or purchased over the counter at a pharmacist, are reported by some sufferers to give partial relief of their symptoms. These need to be used regularly (3 or 4 times per day) and over a long period of time, for as long as it provides benefit.

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

#### How would your doctor monitor your condition?

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Because chronic catarrh is known to affect people for so long without any real change in their symptoms, it is possible that your doctor or your specialist will not feel it necessary to monitor you for this problem. That is not to say that they do not believe that your symptoms are genuine, but rather that they are happy that the symptoms do not indicate anything worrying or serious. If you experience new symptoms, such as blocked nose, runny nose, impairment of smell, sinus pain, sore throat, change in your voice or difficulty with swallowing, you should inform your doctor about it.

#### Uncertainties

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A great number of uncertainties surround chronic catarrh, ranging from what it is to what causes it and this makes it very difficult for doctors to manage satisfactorily. It is important to take account of this when looking for treatment or cures on the internet – a great of variety of internet sites claim to be able to cure catarrh by various means but with very little evidence to back up these claims. Do remember that if doctors thought these internet treatments worked, then the treatments would almost certainly be available on the NHS.

by Russell Cathcart

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