

Water? In My Nose?

Learning to Love the Nasal Wash- Kevin Hoffman

A ripple of discomfort spreads across the room. This class of freshman psychology students is being tapped to volunteer for a research experiment. My task is to introduce the nasal wash to the group and convince as many as possible that cleansing their nostrils might be interesting or even beneficial (and potentially a great career move!). Several students cross their legs or arms and there are a few audible “yucks.” I laugh, having seen many women and men with similar misgivings learn and then become willing and yes, even enthusiastic, users of the nasal wash. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Many of you may be wondering, What is a nasal wash?

It involves pouring warm saline water through the nostrils to gently clear the nasal passages of dried or accumulated mucus. Your first reaction to the thought of passing water through your nose is probably negative, but the nasal wash is neither uncomfortable nor difficult. Nearly everyone can learn it in a few minutes, and once you’ve had the experience of breathing freely through clean, clear nostrils, you’ll probably want to repeat the wash, at least occasionally.

Using warm water to cleanse the nostrils is not a new idea. The procedure is described in ancient yoga and Ayurvedic literature, where it is referred to as jala neti or water cleansing. Cleaning the nostrils with water was common in some European cultures several generations ago. It was still a common medical practice 40-50 years ago and is still used by ear, nose, and throat specialists, but only to treat disease or speed healing of the nasal tissue.

Reasons to Wash Your Nose. Most of us find the thought of water in the nostrils unpleasant, usually because we remember getting water in our nose while swimming or bathing. The nasal wash is quite a different experience from that. You pass water through your nostrils every day of your life. Each time you blink, the saline tears drain through the tear ducts into the nasal passages. When you cry, the waterworks flow not only down your cheeks but also into your nostrils, where they cause the runny nose, which is why sobbing people everywhere reach for a handkerchief. The water used for the nasal wash is prepared so that the salt concentration and the temperature approximate that of tears, which makes the sensation of the water passing through the nostrils soothing.

“Okay,” you say. “So maybe it won’t hurt to pass this warm saline water through my nostrils, but why on earth would I want to?”

There are three main reasons and they all relate to the health and proper function of your inner nostrils. The nostrils filter, heat, and moisturize the air you inhale. They are the interface between your body and the atmosphere. The sensitive lining of the nostrils secretes mucus, which traps dust and dirt particles very effectively if it is moist and presents a tacky surface.

The mucus also contains antibodies, which help protect the body from infection or irritation by foreign materials or organisms. This is important, because you inhale 15–25,000 times daily. All day the moist, sticky mucus collects dust and particles of dirt from the air you breathe and keeps it from entering the lungs. If you don’t clean this matter out of the nostrils, it will end up in your stomach, because the mucus lining of the nostrils slowly moves everything backwards until it is swallowed. When the mucus becomes dried and crusted or laden with dust, it loses its protective function. The nasal wash clears away dried mucus and stimulates the nasal linings to secrete fresh, moist mucus.

Which leads us to the second reason to do the nasal wash—so you can breathe more freely. You’ll find it easier to breathe through the nostrils after doing the nasal wash. Clear breathing is essential to clear thinking and to balancing the senses, body, energy, emotions, and mind—ask any yogi.

The third reason is that keeping the nasal passages clean and clear of congestion enhances the health of the delicate tissues of the inner nostrils, reducing nasal congestion, irritation, and inflammation. Nasal irritation and inflammation contribute to sinusitis by preventing the sinuses from properly draining into the inner nostril.

How to Get the Water into (and out of) Your Nose

Although there are many ways of cleansing the nostrils, such as sniffing water from your palm in the shower or using a glass, the easiest way is to use a ceramic pot constructed specifically for this purpose. This “neti pot” should be made of a non-toxic, easily washable material, and have a spout that fits into the nostril to

deliver the salt water on target. You can use a teacup or other container, but it's messier and more difficult.

Begin by placing 1/2 teaspoon of kosher salt in a container and adding 8 ounces of water at body temperature. Stir to dissolve the salt. Fill the neti pot with the saline solution and move over to a sink. Now you are going to be asked to think in three dimensions. (Don't panic; we're living in four dimensions.) The head position is important in making the wash easy and comfortable. While the water is passing through the nostrils, continue to breathe through the mouth. You can even keep talking. First you must consider tilting the head sideways. Lean over the sink and tilt the head so it is just short of horizontal. The nostrils remain higher than the mouth.

Next, turn the head slightly toward the drain, moving the mouth downward. This is a slight but significant rotation. Note that the mouth is lower than the nostrils.

Gently insert the spout into the upper nostril so it forms a comfortable seal. Keeping the mouth open, begin to pour the water into the upper nostril. Adjust the head position by slightly changing the rotation or the tilt until the water flows freely from the lower nostril. When the pot is empty, remove it from the nostril, bring the head upright above the sink, and exhale through both nostrils to clear them. Use a tissue or handkerchief to gently clear the nostrils but don't blow the nose too forcefully. If you do, there's a slight possibility that you'll force water from the throat into the inner ear.

Repeat the procedure on the other side. Again, adjust the head position so the water flows freely. When the pot is empty, bring the head upright above the sink and again vigorously exhale through both nostrils to clear them.

Clearing Out Excess Water. A few simple exercises will clear all of the remaining water from the nostrils. In the beginning, practice each of these exercises. The shape and conformation of the inner nostril varies among individuals, so experiment until you know which ones are helpful.

Exhalations. First do 15–30 moderately forceful exhalations through both nostrils, holding the head above the sink to catch any water expelled. Do not use excessive force. This should clear out most of the water. Do not restrict the nostrils when exhaling forcefully. Dry the nose with a handkerchief.

Side Stretch. As you inhale, raise the arms at the sides to shoulder height. As you exhale, lower the right arm to the right of the right leg and reach up with the left arm (Fig. 7). As you inhale, come back to the starting position, and with the next exhalation slowly and smoothly bend to the other side, returning to the starting position with the next inhalation. Follow this movement with 10–15 vigorous exhalations to clear any water that might drain from the nostrils.

Alternate Toe Touching. Inhale, raising the arms to shoulder height, parallel with the floor. Exhale while slowly and smoothly bending forward at the waist, twisting the torso and bringing the left hand toward the right toe. Reach up with the right hand and turn the head to look up at the ceiling. As you inhale, come back to the starting position, and with the next exhalation, repeat on the other side. Again, follow these movements with 10–15 vigorous exhalations.

Forward Bending. Bend forward at the waist and bring the head into an inverted position. Then slowly return to an upright position. Follow this movement with 10–15 vigorous exhalations. Clean and dry the nose.

Often one or more of these movements will release a quantity of water from the nostrils. Do that exercise whenever you do the nasal wash to assure that all the water and any loosened matter is removed in the privacy of your room and won't appear unannounced in your breakfast cereal or on an important report. You can gradually eliminate the exercises, as long as you're sure that all the water has drained from the nostrils. At a minimum, always do the first series of 15–30 vigorous exhalations to clear the nostrils.

See, It's Rather Pleasant (and You Can Breathe!). After reading this, it may seem that doing the nasal wash will take a long time. It may while you're learning, but once you settle on a routine and practice it a few times, you'll find it's quick and easy. It takes longer to brush and floss your teeth. You'll discover that the nasal wash is a simple, useful exercise for clearing and cleaning the nostrils. For more information on the nasal wash and the Neti Pot, visit www.netipot.org on the web.