

# Epistaxis (nosebleeds)

## WHAT IS A NOSEBLEED?

Nosebleeds (also called epistaxis) are very common. They can occur at any age but are twice as common in children. Most nosebleeds are harmless and do not require treatment.

Nosebleeds usually happen when a small blood vessel inside the nose lining bursts and bleeds. The lining of the nose has lots of tiny blood vessels that warm the air as it enters the nose. This lining is very fragile and may break easily, causing bleeding.

## WHAT CAUSES A NOSEBLEED?

A range of factors can cause a nosebleed. The common ones include:

- fragile blood vessels that bleed easily, mostly in warm to hot, dry weather
- an infection of the lining of the nostrils, sinuses or adenoids (lymph nodes in the throat behind the nose)
- colds, flu, allergy or hay fever
- bumps or falls
- an object pushed up the nostril
- nose-picking
- constipation causing straining
- medications such as warfarin, aspirin, clopidogrel (also known as 'blood thinners') and anti-inflammatory tablets
- a bleeding or clotting disorder (this is rare).

## TREATMENT

While in the emergency department or urgent care centre, the doctor or nurse will attempt to find the site of the bleeding and treat it.

For severe nosebleeds, you may have a blood test to estimate how much blood you have lost and how well your blood clots.

There are a number of ways to stop the bleeding:

- applying medication that slows the blood flow (such as tranexamic acid)
- cautery (a tool that 'freezes' the blood vessels) to seal them so they no longer break open
- packing your nose with a special dressing (similar to gauze).

Nose-packing is when the doctor has inserted a special dressing inside your nose to absorb blood and other fluids. The packing may need to remain in place for up to two days. Do not remove it yourself. You should go back to your doctor to have it removed. With packing you may be prescribed antibiotics to prevent a bacterial infection.

If nasal packing is not needed, your doctor may advise you to apply an antibiotic ointment (such as Bactroban or Kenacomb) inside the nose.

## FIRST AID

You can stop nearly all nosebleeds yourself at home. Follow these simple first aid steps.

- Stay calm. Crying will make the bleeding worse.
- Sit upright and bend slightly forwards. Use the thumb and forefinger to pinch the nose. Squeeze firmly over the soft part of the nose just above the nostrils (pressure applied to the hard or bony part of the nose does not stop the bleeding). Hold for 10 minutes and then release the grip slowly. You may have to repeat this step until the bleeding stops.
- Do not keep checking whether the bleeding has stopped because the blood needs time to clot.
- Do not blow your nose once the bleeding has stopped otherwise it may bleed again.
- Breathe through your mouth while the nostrils are pinched.
- Spit out any blood that comes into your mouth. Do not swallow the blood.

It may help to put a cold pack or cold cloth over your forehead or the bridge of the nose.

## HOME CARE

- Rest quietly for the next 12–24 hours.
- Avoid hot liquids for at least 24 hours after a nosebleed.
- Do not pick or blow your nose for 12 hours.
- Avoid strenuous exercise, straining or lifting heavy items for seven days.
- If you have constipation, ask your doctor or pharmacist for a stool softener (such as Coloxyl) to prevent straining.
- Avoid aspirin if possible. If your doctor has prescribed aspirin for a specific condition, ask your doctor what you can do to prevent nosebleeds.

- Some people with dry skin in the nose may find ointment (such as Vaseline) or nasal sprays may help. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

- Most nosebleeds cause only minor discomfort.
- Some people may have several nosebleeds over a period of a few weeks.
- In the elderly, the bleeding can come from the back of the nose. This can be serious.
- Sometimes the bleeding is due to an underlying bleeding problem. This is rare.
- Rarely do people lose so much blood that it causes anaemia (a serious reduction in the number of red blood cells).

## PREVENTION

If the bleeding happens often, ask your local doctor to check for any underlying problem. You may need cauterization (a procedure to seal the blood vessels inside the nose) to stop the nosebleeds for good. This only works if one blood vessel is involved. If there are more, then the bleeding is likely to come back. If an ongoing infection is the cause, your doctor may prescribe an antibiotic ointment or tablet.

Other measures that may help prevent nosebleeds include:

- using a humidifier
- drinking plenty of fluids
- using an ointment on the affected area (such as Vaseline)
- using a saline nasal spray
- using headgear when playing sports
- avoiding cigarette smoke.

## Seeking help

In a medical emergency call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

For other medical problems see your local doctor or healthcare professional.

For health advice from a registered nurse you can call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.\*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

\* Calls from mobiles may be charged at a higher rate.

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional.
- Visit the Better Health Channel at [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au).

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