

Ways to ease troublesome symptoms of ENT issues

Some frequently asked questions about ear, nose and throat problems

Q: My ears tend to feel itchy and I like to dig my ears with cotton buds. Is this good for my ears?

A: No, you should not dig your ears at all! Many of my patients turn up with severe ear infections, perforated eardrums and deeply impacted wax, as a result of digging their ears repeatedly. Cotton buds (and metal ear diggers) merely worsen the problem and should be banned from ear use. The ears are self-cleaning as the skin inside migrates outwards to move most wax away.

Ears which are too "clean" tend to feel itchy because repeated ear digging has likely damaged the skin inside and stripped it of its naturally protective oils. Applying a few drops of clean olive oil in your ears is safe and helps to moisturise the dry skin inside to relieve the itching. As persistent itching may sometimes be due to fungal infection, it is best to get your ear examined by a doctor.

Q: My husband snores loudly when asleep and often feels tired during the daytime. Is this

harmful to his health? Is this harmful to my own health?

A: Snoring may be a sign of underlying obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), where the airways repeatedly collapse and close off when asleep. This leads to chronic oxygen deprivation which is associated with an increased risk of heart failure, stroke, sudden death and even reduced life expectancy if left untreated.

Your husband should have a thorough nose and throat check-up and undergo a sleep study to ascertain the severity of any underlying OSA, so that treatment in the form of Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) and/or surgery may be instituted as soon as possible. CPAP is a special device which drives pressurised air into the patient's nose and throat to keep his airways open.

If your husband's snoring is disturbing your own sleep, this may also affect your health as studies show that repeated nights of poor quality sleep have negative effects on your blood sugar, immune system and mental health. Poor sleep is also associated with an increased risk of dementia.

Q: My four-year-old child snores and breathes with his mouth open, especially at night. Should



Many people suffer severe ear infections, perforated eardrums and deeply impacted wax, as a result of digging their ears repeatedly. Cotton buds (and metal ear diggers) merely worsen the problem and should be banned from ear use. PHOTO: FREEIMAGES

I be worried?

A: Although snoring in children is quite common, approximately 10 per cent of children who snore may suffer from underlying obstructive sleep apnea (paediatric OSA). In kids who are otherwise healthy, this is almost always due to enlarged tonsils and adenoids.

The tonsils and adenoids form part of a ring of lymph gland tissue at the back of the nose and throat and may be quite prominent in young children and even teenagers. Enlarged tonsil and adenoid tissue may block off the airway when the child is asleep, affecting his/her breathing and hence quality of sleep from chronic lack of oxygen. This may affect their cognitive and behavioural development, possibly affecting their school performance. Children with OSA may feel tired and less energetic during the day and may sometimes present subtle signs such as bed-wetting at night.

If your child persistently snores or may seem to require extra effort to breathe when asleep, this should be properly investigated. Some studies also suggest that chronic mouth-breathing may result in permanently elongated facial shape and structure in children with enlarged adenoids, the classically described "adenoidal face". If simple measures such as anti-allergy sprays do not help, then surgical removal of the enlarged tonsils and adenoids may be indicated to prevent further airway blockage. This usually cures the problem in more than 90 per cent of cases.

Q: I tend to suffer from nosebleeds but recently they have become more frequent. What should I do?

A: Most nosebleeds arise from delicate blood vessels at the front of the nose, so a simple method to stop nosebleeds is to safely cauterise these vessels with a silver nitrate stick in clinic under local anaesthesia. In cold dry weather or during a flight, the risk of

nosebleeds may be higher so applying some Vaseline cream to the inside of the nose can act as a protective barrier.

What is more worrying is that nosebleeds may be a sign of nasopharyngeal cancer (nose cancer), which is more common in the Chinese population. So it is very important to get the inside of your nose thoroughly examined with a flexible endoscope to rule out a nose tumour because early detection means early treatment and better outcomes.

Q: My ears often feel blocked and sometimes become painful, especially when travelling during flights.

A: When you fly, especially when the plane is landing, changes in air pressure tend to force your Eustachian tubes to slam shut. These are the muscular pressure tubes which join the back of your eardrums to the back of your nose. Hence it is important to actively open the Eustachian tubes by swallowing, yawning or sucking a sweet.

Some people have Eustachian tube dysfunction, where their pressure tubes are "lazier" and require more effort to open. If the pressure between the nose and ear is not equalised by opening the Eustachian tube, there is a risk of eardrum rupture.

Sometimes, fluid may build up behind the eardrums if the pressure tubes do not open properly. Special balloons may be used to dilate the opening of the "lazy" Eustachian tubes (balloon tuboplasty).

Younger children and babies often scream in pain when the plane is landing because they do not yet know how to actively open their Eustachian tubes. Breastfeeding or bottle-feeding them can help to relieve the ear pressure.

If your ears keep on suffering these symptoms, it is best to get them checked out to include a flexible endoscopy of the nose to exclude other more worrying causes.

Q: I suddenly lost the hearing in my right ear last week. What should I do?

A: Sudden hearing loss is a rare but potentially devastating condition as it can severely affect one's quality of life. You should start a course of steroid medication, either in tablet form or given via eardrum injections in clinic, to try to optimise hearing recovery. You also need an MRI scan of the inner ear to rule out inner ear tumours which may be the underlying cause. If the MRI scan does not show an inner ear tumour, then we assume that the sudden hearing loss may be due to viral inflammation of the inner ear. The sooner treatment is started, the higher the chances of recovery which may be up to 50 per cent. As time goes by, the chances of recovery grow increasingly slimmer.

Some patients who do not recover, go on to have a special hearing implant surgically inserted to enable them to continue hearing, especially in noisy environments. Standard hearing aids do not tend to help much in such cases of single-sided hearing loss.

Q: I tend to suffer from blocked and runny nose, with sneezing especially in the morning. I am fed up but what can I do?

A: It certainly sounds like you might be suffering from allergic rhinitis, a condition where the lining of your nose is extra sensitive to certain substances in the environment. The soft tissue inside your nose hence reacts by swelling up, causing the nasal congestion and producing copious watery secretions with sneezing.

The first line of treatment is usually to try to avoid the trigger by performing allergy testing to identify the trigger but this may not always be helpful in isolating the allergen in question. House dust mite is one of the most common triggers in Singapore but minimising one's exposure is tricky. Getting rid of fluffy plush soft toys and making sure your bedlinen, cushions and pillows are regularly aired in the sun can help.

Other forms of treatment include using nasal steroid sprays, saline washes for the nose and antihistamine medication. More recent advances include desensitisation therapy which involves taking a tablet (for grass and house dust mite allergies) daily to try to "calm down" the hyper-responsiveness of the immune system to such triggers. A blocked nose is the main troublesome symptom, then the swollen nasal tissue may be safely reduced in size to help you breathe clearly by undergoing a simple and quick procedure called radiofrequency ablation (RFIT) under local anaesthesia.