

Staying Well with Salt

By Jeff Knutson

Why is it that we have cold and flu season every winter? Who can afford to be sick nowadays with the high cost of health care, including medications, and the downtime it takes to get better? And let's face it, being sick just sucks.

Too bad there isn't some easy cheap way to stay well without living in a bubble. It just seems that the health care professionals don't have any answers beyond loading us up with viral inoculations (that contain viruses) and drugs to cover up symptoms.

My wife, Patty, and I had noticed that a couple years after we had moved to the high desert of Northern Nevada (from the beaches of San Diego) we began catching colds (aka "Rhino virus") every winter. Beginning in November and lasting through March or even into April we would contract cold after cold after cold. At times our cold viruses would become complicated with bacterial infections, dragging out sicknesses for weeks.

Now, the only thing that was different in our life at that time was that we had moved from the ocean to the desert. So, over the next six years we spent thousands of dollars getting tested for allergies, thinking we must be allergic to something in our local environment. We spent over one thousand dollars to have the ducts cleaned in our home, thinking that pathogens might be lurking in our heating system. We spent many thousands more on antibiotics and doctor visits. We even went to Costa Rica for one month three years in a row just to escape! (Well, that part wasn't so bad.) We were convinced where we live was making us sick.

It was the winter of 2007-8 when our doctor told us that this was the worst season for viruses and bacteria in Reno. Oddly enough, it was our BEST year ever; that winter we had only one short little cold that we beat in a matter of days. What was so special for us that season? One thing we did differently that year was to use a little trick a cruise ship doctor, who was from India, had taught us in the fall of 2007: Douse our nasal passages with salt water. As we will see later in this article, this is common practice in India. But why don't OUR doctors give us this critical information? (Maybe they like us to be sick?)

KEEP YOUR NOSE CLEAN

It's an old adage that sounds like some advice a mom might give to her kids as they head off to school in the morning. But it turns out that Asian and Indian customs have been advocating this for centuries.

And how true it turns out to be. For me, this was quite a discovery. Or perhaps I should say re-discovery. Rather than be totally miserable all winter, spending

thousands at the doctor, we bought little bottles of saline nasal spray (SNS) at the drug store for under \$3 and doused our noses several times a day. We felt great – we never got sick! How could this be?

Viruses, including the common cold virus known as Rhinovirus, are transmitted from hands touching hands, noses, and surfaces, and also are found the air around us in offices and public indoor places. If you are in a room full of people, as I and most of us are at work, every cough and sneeze projects viruses into the air we breathe. And people don't even need to exhibit symptoms to spread viruses, as studies show that many asymptomatic subjects exhibit viruses in nasal swabs.

The nasal passages are lined with little hairs and a thin layer of mucous membranes that trap dirt, dust, and pollen and steadily move it all to the rear of the nasal cavity where it lands in the throat and is swallowed. This filtering system is our first line of defense against preventing pathogens from entering our bodies.

But under the right conditions, these viruses and bacteria can enter the cells of the lining of the nasopharynx (the area between the nose and throat), and rapidly multiply. (The major entry point is normally the nose, but can also be the eyes.)

SNS rinses these impurities out of your sinuses before they even reach your throat, not to mention the rest of your system. SNS also keeps this protective layer of mucus functioning properly. If the mucus becomes too thick and dry or too thin and runny, it is easier for bacteria and viruses to penetrate the nasal lining and cause the swelling and excess discharge of mucus we call a "cold."

Washing out your nose and keeping it moist with salt water softens mucus, making it easier to remove. Viruses and pathogenic bacteria are defenseless against salt. But they love to hang out in the nasal mucous membranes and raise their families. If left alone under the right circumstances, they move into your throat and from there migrate into your lungs, stomach, and bloodstream.

When the weather is cold and dry, the nasal passages can get crusty, hindering the cilia in their collective task to remove mucus, as well as providing the perfect environment to grow and multiply. Cilia are small hair-like structures in your nose that aid your sense of smell as well as trap bacteria to prevent them from entering the cells. Studies indicate that SNS helps keep your cilia healthy and functioning.

The key here is that salt water not only washes bacteria, viruses, and allergic materials out of the nose, it also helps eliminate pollen, dust, mold, and fungi. Salt water restores moisture to dry nasal passages and sinuses, lessens the inflammation of mucous membranes, washes out existing pathogens, and makes the entire area inhospitable to the nasty germs that can make life so miserable.

To use Saline Nasal Spray: Tilt your head back, close off your throat from your nose (as you would if you were swimming or diving), squirt the saline spray into each nostril, and blow your nose. You can do this as often as you like.

THE NETI POT

Besides dousing your nose with little bottles of saline nose spray, there is another method known as “Saline Irrigation” that can be used and is even more effective. Saline Irrigation is a method of running warm salty water through your nose - in one nostril and out the other.

To irrigate your sinuses with salt water you use what is called a Neti Pot (also spelled Netti and Netty). Rinsing with salt water using a Neti Pot is an ancient practice in the Orient. Here in the West, the nasal wash has been used for decades as a means of treating the SYMPTOMS of sinus problems, colds, allergies, and post-nasal drip. If we washed our nasal passage daily, we wouldn't find ourselves falling victim to invading pathogens that make us sick in the first place.

That's why gargling or sniffing a little salt water at the first sign of a cold is a staple of Indian folk medicine and why health-conscious people in India use a Neti Pot to rinse the nasal passages. (If we had not met with our doctor on the cruise ship, we still would not know this easy preventative procedure.)

Neti Pots are available at most pharmacies. You can purchase an over-the-counter saline solution in little packets or simply add ¼ teaspoon of sea salt to the pot of warm water (approximately 8 ounces).

The first time you try it, it may seem a little uncomfortable and strange. But I promise, once you get used to it, you will learn to find it a very pleasurable experience – especially when you can enjoy clear sinuses with no drugs at all.

The instructions come with the Neti Pot, but you can also find instructional videos on YouTube.com. (See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8sDIbRAXIq> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVJRctHhYrQ>)

GARGLE DAILY

Your tonsils and adenoids located near the entrance of your breathing passages in your throat serve as a second line of defense against undesirable airborne microorganisms and substances. Viruses that cause colds and flues typically get caught by your tonsils and adenoids before they spread through your body. If they get inflamed, you've got a pretty good-sized infection underway.

I used to think that gargling was just to ease a sore throat, merely treating symptoms. Gargling with warm salt water will actually remove viruses and pathogenic bacteria from the tonsils and adenoids that line the back of your throat region. Regular gargling with warm salty water will make it impossible for viruses and bacteria to form colonies in your throat.

The best way to gargle is to be aggressive about it: Take in a mouthful of warm salt water, tilt your head back and let the salt water inundate the entire region as you gargle. Massaging your throat as you gargle is very effective.

You do not need to wait until you have a sore throat to reap the benefits of gargling with warm salt water. Gargle like this any time you desire with a glass of warm salt water, and repeat as often as you like – especially if you think there is a possibility that you may have been exposed to illness.

Of course, there are other strategies to avoiding dis-ease (aerobic workout which oxygenates your body, enzymes which break down the protein coating of an active viral agent, switching to a [plant-based diet](#) which helps your body's immune function, among many other healthy benefits, and the list goes on and on), but I've yet to find one that offers such clear and immediate results as this.

Cheers!
~ Jeff Knutson