

Vasomotor Rhinitis

If it isn't an allergy, what is it?

Nasal congestion, runny nose, postnasal drip, and sinus headache are signs of a sensitive and inflamed nose (rhinitis). These symptoms for both conditions are very similar. However, the substances that cause them, and the way we test for and treat the two conditions are very different.

When an **immune reaction** in the nose is causing the symptoms, the condition is called **allergic rhinitis**, and the offending substance is called an allergen. Common allergens include pollen, animal dander, and dust mites. Itching is usually one of the most bothersome symptoms of allergic rhinitis.

When a **nerve ending reaction** in the nose is causing the symptoms, the condition is called **vasomotor rhinitis**. In this case, the offending substance is called an irritant. Common irritants include smoke, perfumes, weather changes, and any strong chemical fumes or odors. (Even the aroma from certain flowers and trees can act as irritants.) Nasal congestion, sinus headache, and postnasal drip are usually the most bothersome symptoms of vasomotor rhinitis.

Why don't the tests show reactions?

Allergy tests only detect immune reactions (by skin test or blood test). Because there is no immune reaction involved in vasomotor rhinitis, tests can't identify the troublesome irritants. People usually know the obvious irritants well from personal experience!

How does a person develop this condition?

We don't know. Allergic rhinitis tends to run in families and typically starts in childhood or adolescence. Vasomotor rhinitis doesn't usually run in families and can start at any age. Often, a person may experience a "cold that never went away" or the condition developed after an intense exposure to a strong irritant. Most of the time, however, symptoms develop "out of the blue."

How long will it last?

Vasomotor rhinitis does not follow a regular pattern. It may go away quickly, or it can last for months or years.

What can be done for vasomotor rhinitis?

There are several ways to help control vasomotor rhinitis.

First, **avoid obvious irritants** when possible. Cigarette smoke, perfumes, strong detergents, and other chemical fumes can often be avoided, especially in the home. Other irritants such as smog, car fumes, and weather changes are nearly impossible to avoid.

Secondly, **irrigate your nose and sinuses with salt water on a regular basis**. Add a quarter teaspoon of salt and a quarter teaspoon of baking soda to 8 ounces of lukewarm water. Flush this solution into the nose with a bulb **syringe or nasal rinse bottle** 2 or 3 times a day. (Making a harsh “K” sound at the same time will prevent water from draining down the back of the throat.) Many people find this method an effective way to control symptoms.

Finally, most people with vasomotor rhinitis need to take medicines, regularly or on an as needed basis. The most effective medicine for most people is a nasal corticosteroid such as **Nasarel®**. Sprayed into the nose regularly 2 to 3 times a day, **Nasarel** can greatly reduce sinus sensitivity, and decrease sinus congestion and postnasal drip. Decongestant pills such as **Sudafed®** have the advantage that they can work on an as needed basis, or can be taken regularly. If postnasal drip or runny nose are troublesome, an antihistamine such as **loratadine** can be added.

What about allergy shots or other treatments?

Allergy shots work by changing the immune reaction which is the basis of an allergy. Because the irritants that cause vasomotor rhinitis do not trigger immune reactions, allergy shots won't help. Your doctor may suggest other approaches to try if the above measures are inadequate.