

# Using decongestants safely

As we approach the peak season for colds and flu, many people turn to over-the-counter medicines for relief. And if you have a stuffy nose (known as nasal congestion), you may be thinking about taking a decongestant.

## What are decongestants?

Decongestants are medicines designed to relieve stuffiness and pressure in the nose and sinuses. The two over-the-counter decongestants available are phenylephrine (i.e., Sudafed PE) and pseudoephedrine. Pseudoephedrine are stocked behind a pharmacy counter, but you don't need a prescription. Both medicines work by shrinking blood vessels in the nose, allowing air to pass through more easily.



## Are decongestants safe?

Decongestants are safe when they are used properly. Here's what to know before you take one:

- Read the label and be sure you understand how much you can take and how often to take it. If you're not sure, ask your pharmacist or doctor.
- Know the active ingredients. Many cold and flu products contain several active ingredients. They are listed on the drug facts label at the top. Be sure you don't accidentally take too much of one ingredient. For instance, many cold products contain acetaminophen, a pain reliever that can be toxic in high doses. If you've already taken a pain reliever with acetaminophen and you take the cold medicine too, you could take too much acetaminophen.
- Talk to your doctor before taking a decongestant if you have diabetes, heart conditions, high blood pressure, glaucoma, prostate problems or thyroid disease.
- If you take other over-the-counter or prescription medicines, ask your doctor if decongestants can be safely taken with your other medicines.
- Do not give decongestants or any cough or cold product to kids under 4 years of age. Ask your child's pediatrician before giving them any medicines.
- Talk to your doctor if you need to take a decongestant for longer than a week.



## What about nasal sprays?

Saline nasal sprays with no medicine in them are safe to use daily, as often as needed. These can help flush out allergens and mucus so you can breathe easier. Not sure if it's just saline? Look at the drug facts label and be sure it contains only sodium chloride as the active ingredient.



But, decongestant sprays that contain active ingredients are not safe to take for more than three days in a row. This is because your body can become dependent on them. When this happens, your nose may become even stuffier over time, and you'll have to use more and more spray to get relief.

Medicines can help you cope with bothersome cold and flu symptoms. But, be safe and savvy before you take them – and keep them in a locked cabinet out of children's reach!

Sources: American Academy of Family Physicians, Food and Drug Administration