

15 Table. Nasal Irrigations and Oral Rinses

We recommend use of Nasal Lavage device by Waterpik (Amazon)

Nasal irrigation (also called "nasal lavage" or "nasal douching") is an ancient and widespread practice. There are many areas of the world where nasal irrigation is every bit as commonplace as the western practice of brushing one's teeth. This can be performed with an irrigation syringe, although it may be more gentle with a gentle pump made for this purpose and available on www.hydromedonline.com.

Relative to nasal irrigation, *oral rinses* (gargles, mouthwashes) are a good deal more common in the western hemisphere. Unfortunately, most commercial rinses (such as Scope or Listerine) are formulated with the taste buds in mind, and are injurious to the mucosal lining of the mouth and throat. Listerine, for example, contains 26.9% alcohol (that's nearly 54 proof!) In addition to alcohol, many commercial rinses contain a sweetener such as saccharine, and some contain detergents similar to what is used in toothpastes.

I. RECIPES and other options for Nasal Lavage Solution

For do-it-yourself solutions, mix the ingredients, boil, and store the solution in a clean, air-tight container. A glass container with a screw-on cap is ideal (if you use a Tupperware-type container, the solution may take on an unpleasant plastic odor.) Home-made solutions should be discarded after one week (then prepare a fresh batch.) If the solution looks cloudy, or if you see particulate matter floating in it, do not use it— make yourself a fresh batch.

A. Isotonic saline (salt water that is about as salty as your body fluids)

1 teaspoon salt (table salt is fine)

1 teaspoon baking soda (NOT baking powder!)

1 pint of water (use distilled or filtered water if you have any concerns about the quality of your tap water.)

Comment: baking soda (sodium bicarbonate) improves the mucus-solvent properties of the irrigant. You can purchase sterile saline (available in the contact lens care section of any grocery store or pharmacy) but this is more expensive, of course, and does not have sodium bicarbonate.

B. Hypertonic saline (salt water that is saltier than your body fluids)

2 teaspoons of salt
1 teaspoon of baking soda
1 pint of water

Comment: this solution is well-tolerated as an oral rinse, but you will find it to be more irritating than isotonic saline if you use it as a nasal irrigant. Nevertheless, it is safe and very effective as a nasal irrigant. In warm coastal communities (for example, Florida or other Gulf Coast states), many folks with sinus problems find that swimming in seawater helps them to heal faster. "Getting a noseful" of seawater is key— you don't have to swim! In our area, the waters are too frigid for most people to tolerate a quick plunge in the ocean. This hypertonic saline irrigant is a very crude (but effective) approximation of seawater.

C. Alkalol

Alkalol is a commercially available solution which can be used as an oral rinse or nasal irrigant. It is made by The Alkalol Company (Taunton, MA) and can be ordered by your pharmacist. It is fairly inexpensive (about \$3.50 per pint, on average.) The active ingredients are salt (sodium chloride), alum (an astringent), and baking soda (sodium bicarbonate.) Alkalol also contains a number of natural extracts such as menthol and eucalyptol which, as far as I can tell, are present primarily for flavor.

The label says that Alkalol can be used at half or full strength, but I recommend that it be used at full strength. It can be safely used as a nasal irrigant or oral rinse.

D. What about plain water?

Salt follows water, and water follows salt. Anyone who has ever seen the effect of salt on a snail knows what happens to the snail. Hypertonic saline will tend to draw a small amount of water from the tissues it contacts; this is desirable if the tissues are swollen (edematous.) Plain water, on the other hand, will tend to enter the tissues, thereby increasing swelling (edema.) When you sit for a long time in a bath, your fingertips wrinkle because the water content of the skin is *increasing*, so the skin must "buckle" to accommodate the extra water.

This recommendation against plain water as an irrigant or rinse would seem to contradict another piece of advice that doctors give very frequently: **drink more fluids!** The current recommendation for adults is to drink eight to ten 8 ounce glasses per day of noncaffeinated, nonalcoholic beverages (at the high end, this translates to 10 cups, or 2.4 liters per day.) There is no contradiction, however. Assuming that you are otherwise healthy, your kidneys will handle this volume of fluids very well, and your body's concentrations of various salts will vary hardly a bit. (With certain illnesses, such as kidney failure or congestive heart failure, aggressive hydration can be very harmful. Discuss the question of fluid intake with your physician if you have any doubts about the safety of drinking 10 cups of fluids daily.)

How often should I use an oral rinse or nasal irrigant?

Moderation in all things; for most problems, two to three times per day will be

sufficient.
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