



Nasal saline irrigation may be beneficial for acute upper respiratory tract infections

Clinical question

How effective is nasal saline irrigation in treating the symptoms of acute upper respiratory tract infections (URTIs)?

Bottom line

Nasal saline irrigation is a safe treatment that may be of some benefit for some patients. Most results showed no difference between nasal saline treatment and control. In adults, 1 study showed a mean difference of 0.3 day (out of 8 days) for symptom resolution, but this was not significant. Nasal saline irrigation was associated with less time off work in 1 study, and there was a trend towards less antibiotic use. Minor discomfort was not uncommon, and 40% of infants did not tolerate nasal saline drops.

Caveat

The existing evidence is too limited to recommend nasal saline irrigation as a standard intervention. Included trials were too small and had too high a risk of bias to be confident about the possible benefits of nasal saline irrigation in acute URTIs.

Context

URTIs, including the common cold and rhinosinusitis, are common afflictions that cause discomfort and debilitation, and contribute significantly to workplace absenteeism. Treatment is generally by antipyretic and mucolytic drugs, and often antibiotics, even though most infections are viral. Nasal saline irrigation is often employed as an adjunct treatment for chronic or allergic sinusitis, but little is known about its effect on acute URTIs.

Cochrane Systematic Review

Kassell JC et al. Saline nasal irrigation for acute upper respiratory tract infections. Cochrane Reviews, 2010, Issue 3. Article No. CD006821. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD006821.pub2.
This review contains 3 studies involving 618 participants.

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