

Decongestion Hacks or Hazards?

People across the country are getting sick with a multitude of seasonal illnesses. Colds, the flu, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), and COVID-19 seem to be lurking around every corner, and one symptom that seems to be unavoidable is congestion. While over-the-counter medications to help combat congestion are flying off store shelves, some people are taking matters into their own hands and are resorting to at-home remedies.

A couple of congestion remedies in particular that many people are trying at home include garlic and onions. While using these popular kitchen staples to combat side effects from seasonal illnesses may seem like something new, these “hacks” have actually been around for a long time. In fact, claims that raw onions can help relieve congestion date as far back as the 1500s.

“These kinds of remedies like onions in your socks and a lot of these things have existed for centuries when they didn’t really understand the science behind how infections are passed. It just kind of grabbed hold and it resurfaces every couple years, or even decades,” says Dr. Brian Curtis, vice president of clinical specialty services for OSF HealthCare.

Recently, people have been posting their own videos of at-home remedies on social media. The video shows they are congested because of an illness of some sort but after sleeping with onions in their socks, they wake up with little to no congestion. So, does it work?

“It is purely anecdotal. Maybe you did it and your cold got better, but it actually would have probably gotten better whether you did the onion in your sock or not. But there is no harm in putting an onion in your sock and going to sleep with it – as long as you don’t need to sleep near someone else,” Dr. Curtis jokes.

Another “hack” involving onions consists of soaking chopped onions in water for up to 12 hours and then drinking the onion water, claiming it clears congestion. While sleeping with onions in your socks or drinking onion water are not scientifically proven to relieve congestion, Dr. Curtis says consuming onions may have other health benefits that could come in handy if you are sick.

“They are a good source of vitamins and flavonoids which decrease your inflammation, so it is good for that,” explains Dr. Curtis.

Another alleged “hack” that people are trying is putting a clove of garlic in one or both nostrils and leaving it there for a period of time. The claim is that this will work as a decongestant because once the garlic is removed from the nose, the sinuses will drain and any congestion will have gone away. However, Dr. Curtis warns that this is not something you should try at home.

“It would be pretty dangerous to put anything in your nose in case it got stuck so I would not recommend it. It would probably be similar to like when you eat horseradish, which causes a vasoconstriction within your nose, causes your eyes to water, and would cause you to have probably a little bit more excretions from your nose – but I would not put anything in your nose,” Dr. Curtis advises.

If you prefer a natural way to help relieve any congestion you may be experiencing, some safe and effective remedies include taking a hot shower, applying a warm compress to your face, eating spicy foods, keeping your head elevated, and staying hydrated. Additionally, humidifiers, cool mist vaporizers, Neti pots, and nasal decongestant strips could also offer relief.

If you come down with a seasonal illness this winter and your symptoms worsen or do not go away after a few days, make an appointment with your primary care provider or go to the nearest urgent care center.