

Forget nose spray, good sex clears a stuffy nose just as effectively and is a lot more fun

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Medical news is full of stories about promising new treatments for challenging conditions, or for additional health benefits of routine behaviors and habits. Who doesn't want to feel good about [drinking](#)

[coffee](#) or eating [chocolate](#)?

In this rich vein, a [study](#) by German and British researchers published earlier this year—which just [won the Ig Nobel prize for medicine](#)—suggests orgasmic sex can clear nasal congestion as well as a nasal decongestant.

The Ig Nobels are awarded to "honor achievements that first make people laugh, and then make them think," with a [ceremony](#) at Harvard University and Nobel laureates among those handing out prizes.

This year's winner deserves critical appraisal before deciding whether to prescribe orgasm for consenting partners with stuffy noses.

A small but well-formed study

When we critically appraise research it's important to look at "[internal validity](#)" first. Could the results have been caused by other factors, such as bias due to flaws in design or how the research was conducted? The next step is to ask whether the findings have "external validity" or can be generalized to the wider population.

Also, with most studies that aren't using the "[gold standard](#)" study design of double-blinded, randomized controlled trials, we need to consider other factors to establish cause and effect. This includes consistency with other evidence and [biological plausibility](#)—or whether the findings tally with established understandings of our bodies.

The German-UK study was clearly not a double-blind study (the couples knew they were having sex) and was small in size (18 heterosexual couples), but each subject was their own "control" subject. That means each person had the intervention—sexual intercourse with orgasm—compared with a nasal decongestant spray applied the

following day.

Nasal flow was measured at five time points: before sex, after orgasm and up to three hours afterwards. Subjects were tested with a questionnaire to determine which ones had pre-existing nose blockages over the past month. Nasal function was assessed subjectively by the participant and objectively with a portable device measuring air flow.

As such, this study was well-designed and conducted. That is, apart from one minor flaw: some participants were unable to focus on the device before and immediately after intercourse, leading to some missing data!

Going with the flow

The study did find a significant improvement in nasal flow immediately after orgasm and this was of similar size to the benefit from decongestant spray used the following day.

However, the benefit from sexual activity was short-lived and nasal flow was back to baseline within hours. Unsurprisingly, the improved nasal flow was only seen in those with pre-existing nasal congestion.

Wait, there's a connection between orgasm and noses?

The [research paper](#) notes the theory of "reflex nasal neurosis" was put forward by German otolaryngologist Wilhelm Fliess, a close friend of Sigmund Freud, in 1897. Both believed neuroses were mostly caused by sexual problems.

Fliess [theorized](#) there were specific "genital spots" in the nose that influenced genital function. Yet his theory failed scientific scrutiny and faded into obscurity.

However, exercise is known to cause an improved nasal flow and this benefit [persists](#) for up to 30 minutes after physical activity.

The 'take home' message

There are some limitations of the research, such as the small sample size of volunteer couples, and the timing of nasal air flow measurements.

But overall, the [study](#) presents some convincing evidence that orgasm improves nasal obstruction, at least for an hour or so. And, as the researchers note: "I don't think other methods to relieve congestion are nearly as much fun as sexual activity."

The Ig Nobel winners suggest further research into whether masturbation has similar benefits, or whether multiple orgasm might provide longer relief of nasal congestion.

So, those with [nasal congestion](#) shouldn't throw away their decongestant sprays just yet. However, all of us can bask in the warm glow of knowing we can add another health benefit to sexual intercourse and [orgasm](#).

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