

Chronic Nasal Obstruction / Your Stuffy Nose
Chronic Nasal Obstruction and Enlarged Turbinates

Chronic nasal obstruction, or a stuffy nose, is most typically caused by enlargement of the inferior nasal turbinates. The nasal turbinates---small, shelf-like, bony structures covered by mucous membranes (mucosa)---protrude into the nasal airway and help to warm, humidify and cleanse air as it is inhaled and before it reaches the lungs.

Chronic enlargement (hypertrophy) of the turbinates and the accompanying symptom of nasal obstruction affect people throughout the day, as well as during sleep. A chronic stuffy nose can impair normal breathing, force patients to breathe through the mouth and turn the simple acts of eating, drinking and speaking into an annoying and sometimes painful experience.

Enlarged turbinates and nasal congestion can also contribute to headaches and sleep disorders such as snoring and obstructive sleep apnea, as the nasal airway is the normal breathing route during sleep. Once turbinate enlargement becomes chronic, it is irreversible except with surgical intervention.

What Causes Chronic Nasal Obstruction?

Chronic turbinate hypertrophy and nasal obstruction are commonly associated with rhinitis, the inflammation of the mucous membranes of the nose. When the mucosa becomes inflamed, the blood vessels inside the membrane swell and expand, causing the turbinates to become enlarged and obstruct the flow of air through the nose.

According to several large population surveys, approximately 20% of the population, or more than 50 million Americans, suffers from some type of chronic rhinitis. Common forms of rhinitis that can cause enlarged turbinates and nasal congestion include allergic, vasomotor, irritative and drug-induced.