

Coping with the Cold Season

Dr. Lon Jones, DO

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One of our primary goals at Common Sense Medicine is to teach the value of our defenses and to explain that the bothersome symptoms they sometimes produce should not be ‘balanced’ with drugs to bring the body back into balance and therefore more healthy. That is an old and outdated definition of health, but it persists. Hobbling the defense of your favorite football team means they will lose the game and it’s the same with us.

Our primary nasal defense is the combination of the mucus and the cilia that grab and hold onto the stuff in the air that we breathe—bacteria, viruses, allergens, . . . whatever—that should not get into our lungs. When this process is challenged it leads to a runny, stuffy nose that we wrongheadedly use drugs to block. We argue that using xylitol nasally is a much better choice. Joseph Zabner, at the University of Iowa has done several studies looking at what xylitol does in the airway: first of all it is safe to put in the nose; it is not absorbed but acts locally to pull water into the airway (water that is necessary for both the mucus and the cilia to work properly); secondly it helps our own antibiotic agents in the nose work better; thirdly it helps get rid of the infecting germs that cause most problems; and finally these effects and the xylitol last about three hours in the airway. What this amounts to is that xylitol is a very good way to counter the effects of the decreases in humidity that are a part of winter time. Virtually all homes today have central heating and heated air holds on to more water, so the effect is to rob our noses of the water in the air.

There is a very good video that explains what dry air does to our nasal defense put out by a health care agency in New Zealand to help market the humidifier they sell for CPAP machines, used by people with sleep apnea. It’s on youtube so anyone can use it and it explains very graphically what happens in the winter when we don’t get enough moisture in the air to help our noses. Clicking on the link will take you away from here, but remember to keep your noses clean and this video explains why. There are six videos in the series and they will take about 20 minutes.