CONDITION

Foreign body in the nose

A foreign body in the nose is an object lodged inside one nostril.

WHAT IT IS
An object lodged inside the nose

BODY SYSTEM
Nose and airways

MAIN SYMPTOMS
One-sided discharge, bad smell, blockage, nosebleed

WHAT CAUSES IT
Accidental insertion, especially during childhood

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Direct examination inside the nose

MAIN TREATMENT
Careful removal by a healthcare professional

CAN IT BE CURED?
Yes - removal usually resolves it

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Sometimes - button batteries, magnets, or breathing difficulty

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Complete recovery is usual after safe removal

Overview

A foreign body in the nose is an object stuck inside a nostril. It is most common in young children, who may insert small items while exploring or playing, but it can also happen in older children and adults.

Common objects include beads, toy parts, paper, foam, food, seeds, stones, and small batteries. Occasionally, an insect enters the nose. Material left after nasal surgery or an injury is a less common cause.

Most nasal foreign bodies are not immediately dangerous, but they should be removed because they can cause bleeding, infection, swelling, or tissue damage. An object can also move toward the throat and enter the airway.

Button batteries need emergency removal because electrical and chemical reactions can

rapidly damage tissue. Paired magnets are also urgent because they can trap and injure the wall between the nostrils.

Symptoms

Someone may be seen placing an object in their nose, but often the insertion goes unnoticed. Symptoms may begin immediately or develop days or weeks later.

Typical symptoms include:

One-sided, foul-smelling nasal discharge in a child is an important clue, especially when the object has caused irritation or infection.

Some people have few symptoms. A smooth plastic bead may remain without causing immediate pain. Beans, peas, sponge, and other absorbent materials can swell with moisture, worsening the blockage.

Breathing difficulty, choking, persistent coughing, or wheezing may mean that an object has moved into the throat or airway. This requires emergency help.

- A blocked feeling in one nostril
- Thick or bad-smelling discharge from one side
- A nosebleed or blood-stained mucus
- Pain, irritation, or tenderness inside the nose
- A bad smell noticed by the person or others
- Noisy breathing through the affected nostril

Causes and risk factors

Most cases occur when an object is deliberately placed in the nose during play or exploration. Young children may not understand the risk or may be unable or unwilling to explain what happened.

Small objects that are easy to pick up create the greatest risk, including beads, toy parts, food, magnets, and button batteries. Nasal foreign bodies can also occur in people with developmental disabilities, memory problems, or mental health conditions that affect judgment or behaviour.

Attempts to remove an object can push it deeper, especially when it is smooth, round, slippery, or difficult to see. Repeated attempts may cause swelling and bleeding, making safe removal

harder.

Diagnosis

A healthcare professional usually diagnoses a nasal foreign body by asking what happened and examining the nose with a light. A nasal speculum may be used to hold the nostril gently open.

The examination checks the object's size, shape, material, and position, as well as any bleeding, swelling, discharge, or tissue damage. The opposite nostril may also be checked. In young children, the ears and mouth may be examined because more than one object may have been inserted.

X-rays or scans are not routinely needed if the object is clearly visible. Imaging may be considered when it cannot be found, may be metallic, or could have entered deeper structures. Many plastic, paper, wood, and organic objects do not appear on X-rays.

A button battery can resemble a coin and may show a double rim or "halo" on an X-ray. However, suspected batteries should not wait for routine testing if prompt removal is possible.

A long-standing object may become coated with mucus and mineral deposits, forming a hard mass called a rhinolith or "nose stone." An ear, nose, and throat specialist may then be needed.

Treatment and management

Treatment involves removing the object without pushing it farther back or damaging the nose. The method depends on its shape, position, material, and whether the person can remain still.

A healthcare professional may use suction, forceps, a small hook, or a balloon device passed behind the object. Good lighting and a clear view are essential. Pain relief or nasal medicine to reduce swelling may be used.

For some children, a positive-pressure technique may be suitable. One version, called a "parent's kiss," involves gently blowing air through the child's mouth while closing the clear nostril. The pressure may push the object out. A healthcare professional should advise whether this is appropriate because it is not safe in every situation.

Avoid repeated home attempts. Tweezers, cotton swabs, fingers, and other tools may push the object deeper or injure the nose. Water irrigation is generally avoided because it can move the object toward the airway and make beans or other plant material swell. Never flush out a suspected battery with liquid.

If removal is not straightforward, an ear, nose, and throat specialist may use special

instruments or a small camera. Sedation or general anaesthesia may be needed when the object is deep, the person cannot keep still, or previous attempts caused swelling.

Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline are not routinely needed after uncomplicated removal. They may be used for significant infection or tissue injury. Follow-up may be arranged if the object broke apart, complete removal is uncertain, or the nose needs time to heal.

Complications

Most objects are removed without lasting problems. Complications are more likely when an object remains for a long time, causes pressure, or has been pushed deeper.

Possible complications include:

Button batteries can cause burns, tissue death, scarring, or a hole in the nasal septum, even when they are not leaking. Paired magnets can squeeze the septum and cut off its blood supply.

After removal, mild soreness, temporary congestion, or a small amount of blood-stained mucus may occur. Persistent bleeding, worsening pain, fever, or continuing foul-smelling discharge needs medical review.

- Bleeding or a scrape inside the nose
- Infection and continuing bad-smelling discharge
- Swelling or blockage
- Damage to the nasal septum between the nostrils
- Sinus infection
- Movement into the throat or airway
- Formation of a rhinolith

Prevention

Not every nasal foreign body can be prevented, as insertion can happen quickly even with close supervision.

Keep button batteries, loose magnets, beads, and other small objects out of young children's reach. Check toys and household items for loose battery compartments or detachable parts. Store both spare and used batteries securely because used batteries can still cause injury.

Choose age-appropriate toys and follow warnings about small parts. Explain calmly that

objects do not belong in the nose, ears, or mouth. Avoid punishment, since a child may otherwise hide a future incident.

People with developmental, memory, or behavioural difficulties may benefit from closer supervision and safer storage of small objects.

Living with it and what to expect

A nasal foreign body is usually a short-term problem. Once the entire object has been removed without major tissue damage, blockage and discharge generally settle. Mild irritation may continue while the nasal lining heals.

Follow-up is more likely after removal of a battery or magnet, a difficult extraction, significant bleeding, infection, or concern that part of the object remains. Tissue injury may need monitoring over the following weeks.

An undiscovered object can cause symptoms for weeks or months. Continuing discharge or a bad smell from one nostril should not simply be assumed to be a recurring cold or allergy.

Lasting problems are uncommon after straightforward removal. Damage from a battery, paired magnets, or a long-standing object may require specialist care and take longer to heal.

When to get medical help

Seek emergency care now if there is:

Do not wait for symptoms after a suspected button-battery insertion. Tissue damage may begin before pain or discharge develops.

Arrange prompt medical assessment if an object is visible or known to be inside the nose, even if it is not causing discomfort. Unexplained one-sided, bad-smelling discharge or repeated bleeding also needs assessment.

Attend follow-up if advised. Return for review if pain, swelling, fever, bleeding, blockage, or foul-smelling discharge continues or worsens, as this may indicate infection, tissue injury, or material still inside the nose.

- Trouble breathing, choking, blue or grey colouring, or collapse
- A suspected or confirmed button battery in the nose
- Two or more magnets, or magnets trapping nasal tissue
- An object that may have moved into the airway

- Heavy bleeding that does not stop with firm, gentle pressure

Common questions

Can I remove an object from the nose at home?

Avoid probing with tweezers, cotton swabs, fingers, or other tools because these can push the object deeper or cause injury. A healthcare professional may recommend a positive-pressure method in selected cases. Batteries and magnets require urgent professional removal.

What happens if the object stays in the nose?

It may cause one-sided blockage, bleeding, infection, or foul-smelling discharge. Mineral deposits may eventually form a rhinolith around it. Batteries and paired magnets can cause much faster and more serious damage.

Can a nasal foreign body go into the lungs?

An object can move backward into the throat and enter the airway. This is uncommon but is one reason to avoid repeated blind removal attempts. Choking, coughing, wheezing, or breathing difficulty needs emergency assessment.

Why does only one nostril smell bad or produce discharge?

An object can trap mucus and irritate one nostril, allowing bacteria to grow and cause thick, unpleasant-smelling discharge. Other conditions can cause similar symptoms, so medical examination is needed.

Will an X-ray always show the object?

No. Metal and some glass may be visible, but plastic, paper, food, wood, and foam often are not. Diagnosis usually relies on examination, with imaging used when the object's type or location is uncertain.

Does removal hurt?

Removal may be uncomfortable, particularly if the nose is irritated. Clinicians may use pain relief, medicine to reduce swelling, sedation, or anaesthesia when needed. Remaining still helps make removal safer and quicker.

Sources

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