Acceptance and effects of nasal lavage in volunteer woodworkers

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Wood dust is an irritant and is carcinogenic to the nasal mucosa. It inhibits its own
clearance from the nose. It therefore makes sense to lavage retained wood dust from
the nose following exposure. To our knowledge this is the second study conducted to
determine whether the procedure of nasal lavage reduces nasal symptoms in
woodworkers. Forty-six woodworkers from 150 approached volunteered to trial nasal
lavage using gravity fed, home-made unbuffered isotonic saline for 2 months in a
crossover trial and then be followed-up a year later. The group reported significantly
decreased nasal symptoms and over half continued to use nasal lavage voluntarily
after 1 year. Results support the findings of the previous study that nasal lavage
improves nasal symptoms and supplements those findings with data indicating
patterns of voluntary usage following the study's conclusion. It is concluded that nasal
lavage is an acceptable, effective and inexpensive option with minimal side effects for
woodworkers who experience nasal symptoms and who wish to try the procedure.

Key words: Nasal cancer; nasal irrigation; nasal lavage; nasal symptoms; prevention;
saline; wood-dust.

INTRODUCTION

Exposure to wood dust is associated with nasal problems
such as blocked nose, dry nose, runny nose, nosebleeds and
sinusitis.1,2 Wood dust is a mucous membrane irritant3 and nasal symptoms are common amongst
woodworkers.4,5 Wood dust is also a Group 1 IARC
carcinogen,6 causing nasal adenocarcinoma. A proposed
mechanism for carcinogenesis is that wood dust in high
concentrations inhibits normal mucociliary clearance7,8
and secondly that the dust contains many chemicals
which have been demonstrated to be irritant, genotoxic
and/or mutagenic.9,10,11 It is postulated that inhaled
wood dust remains in the nose leading to carcino-
genesis.12,13

It is logically accepted that zero exposure to wood dust
is the best way to prevent nasal symptoms and cancer.
There is, however, little information about how to pro-
ceed following exposure. Because the nose may not be
capable of self-cleansing, it is sensible to wash out wood
dust retained in the nose following exposure. The pro-
cess is directly comparable to handwashing follow-
ing chemical exposure. Such lavage could reduce nasal
irritant symptoms and possibly reduce the risk of
adenocarcinoma.

The effect of nasal lavage on nasal symptoms in wood
industry workers was investigated by Holmstrom et al.5
They studied 45 wood industry workers over a period of
six weeks. Over the first three weeks the workers used
nasal lavage with 'Rhinomer' (de-ionised sterilised iso-
tonic seawater) four times a day and then nothing for the
remaining three weeks. Holmstrom demonstrated a sig-
nificant improvement in nasal symptoms, peak nasal
expiratory flow and mucociliary clearance following
'Rhinomer' usage, and then a return to pre-intervention
levels 3 weeks after cessation of nasal lavage. The study
indicated that 80% of participants were enthusiastic
about continuing to use 'Rhinomer' after the study was
completed.

This was the second study of which we were aware of
on the effects of nasal lavage on nasal symptoms in
woodworkers. The objectives of the study were to deter-
mine whether saline nasal lavage (SNL) reduced nasal
symptoms, and whether it was acceptable and useful to
woodworkers. The SNL technique used was Jala Neti, a
yoga practice. Effects of SNL on nasal cancer could not
be assessed by this study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design

Initially a crossover trial14 was performed. Fifty wood-
workers were randomly allocated to two groups. The first
group used SNL twice daily for 2 months whilst the second group did not. Then the second group used SNL for 2 months while the first group did not. At the end of this crossover trial, subjects were given the option of purchasing a ‘pot’ used to perform the procedure, instructed to use SNL if they wanted to, and then reassessed 1 year later. Response data were obtained on four occasions: prior to commencement of the study (control data), at two months, at four months and at the 1 year follow-up. Responses were obtained from self-administered questionnaires.

Selection of participants

Crossover study. The study population included woodworkers in Sydney, Australia. From three meetings of woodworking groups, a population of 150 attendees produced 50 volunteers for the study. Prior to commencement of the crossover study, four volunteers withdrew. Two had trialed SNL.

Saline nasal lavage (Jala Neti)

Jala Neti is an old yoga method. A purpose built pot, not unlike a small teapot with a volume of 400 ml, is filled with warm tap water and a teaspoon of salt is added to produce an approximately isotonic solution. The pot has a smooth conical nozzle for insertion into one nostril. The smooth nozzle prevents trauma and forms a seal with the nostril to prevent leakage. The person performing the procedure then bends forwards until the nasal passages are at a lower level than the larynx. The head is then turned 25 degrees, for example, to the right, and the nozzle inserted into the right nostril. Warm saline then fills the right nasal cavity, passes behind the nasal septum and flows out of the left nostril. Mouth breathing is possible during the procedure. The other side is then lavaged, and the nose dried by ‘panting’ through the nose (Figure 1).

Questionnaires

Basic demographic data were obtained by questionnaire, as well as records of SNL usage, measures of the perceived usefulness of the procedure and general comments. Questions about the presence of nasal symptoms, other symptoms, general health and sleep patterns recorded responses on 0–100 mm visual analogue scales with prompts written below the scales (see legend, Table 1).

Repeatability of the questionnaire was estimated by subtracting the results from the first response (prior to commencing the study) from the response after 2 months of not using SNL. The standard deviation of the measurement error (s) was calculated as:

\[ s = \sqrt{\frac{1}{2n}} \sum (x_i - y)^2. \]

For nasal problems, s = 16.0, mean = 9.0. For eye problems s = 15.1, mean = 5.7. Results for all other variables in Table 1 were generally comparable with these.

Statistical analysis

Analysis of the 0–100 mm visual analogue scale crossover trial data was performed according to Armitage and Berry. The crossover trial used data taken at 0 months (control), 2 months and 4 months. Analyses used two-
sample t-tests to test SNL effect, period effects and period × SNL interaction. SNL × period interaction was assessed using control readings. (These t-tests for period effects and period × SNL interaction were uniformly insignificant indicating no detectable period effect or interaction). To assess one year follow-up changes, follow-up results were subtracted from control (0 month) results and the differences analysed using one-sample t-tests.

RESULTS

Characteristics of participants
The participants were four women and 42 men. Ages ranged from 24–71 years (mean = 43 years). There were five smokers, 23 ex-smokers and 18 never-smokers. Thirty-four subjects worked more than 10 hours per week, 10 worked 4–10 hours per week and the remaining two worked 1–4 hours per week. Mean time potentially exposed to wood dust was 2.8 years. Twenty-three people used no dust controls at work except personal protection. Wetting was used by 14, fans by three and extraction ventilation by seven. Sixteen used personal respiratory protection most of the time at work, 27 sometimes and three never. Five reported 'no nasal problems', 24 'some problems' and 17 'lots of nose problems'.

Forty-six subjects completed the crossover trial. Thirty-nine purchased 'pots' and provided information at 1 year follow-up.

Effect on nasal symptoms
The procedure of nasal lavage was shown to be significantly (p = 0.0001) associated with the perception of decreased nasal problems both during the crossover study and at 1 year follow-up. Table 1 shows the mean perceptions for the four measurement periods as well as the statistical significance of changes. Of the 39 subjects who completed the study, 14 had reported 'lots of nose problems' and 21 'some problems' prior to the study. After 1 year only two reported 'lots of nose problems' while 18 reported 'some problems'.

Acceptability and usefulness
Twenty-two subjects reported regular SNL usage at 1-year follow-up (Table 2). More than 34 found SNL useful (Figure 2).

Difficulties encountered were more frequent initially and included water running into the mouth, slow flow through a blocked nostril, finding the correct head angle, stinging due to an incorrect salt/water mix and nosebleeds. These problems did not occur after the initial crossover trial. Twenty-one subjects had no difficulties at
Table 2. SNL usage of 48 subjects after 1 year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>After dust exposures occasionally</th>
<th>After dust exposures regularly</th>
<th>For other reasons occasionally</th>
<th>For other reasons regularly</th>
<th>Every day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Perceived usefulness of SNL at 1-year follow-up (n = 48).

The first attempt at SNL, and this had increased to 32 after the first week.

Only two subjects used SNL at the workplace. Most used it in their bathrooms at home. The time reported to perform the procedure averaged 4 min 20 sec. At 1-year follow-up, eight of 39 participant comments about SNL spontaneously mentioned that SNL removes wood dust from the nose.

Other symptoms
Changes in other aspects of health and well-being were not demonstrated convincingly (Table 1).

DISCUSSION
The study supports the previous findings of Hölmstrom et al. that SNL improves nasal symptoms in woodworkers (Table 1). It provides supplementary information by following subjects over 1 year. The study shows that many volunteer woodworkers who wish to try SNL will benefit from using it, continue to use it (Table 2) and regard it as a useful long-term aid (Figure 2). Indications are that people will use SNL according to their own needs, and particularly after wood dust exposure (Table 2).

This study recruited volunteers who may not be representative of woodworkers in general. Despite this sampling shortcoming, the study suggests that the procedure could be of use to a proportion of woodworkers. The proportion is probably significant, because one third of woodworkers approached volunteered to participate in the study, and 74% of these found SNL ‘quite’ or ‘very’ useful. Study results must apply only to volunteers and are not generalizable.

This study did not have a control group using a placebo, so subjects were aware that they were using SNL, and placebo effects may have occurred. This shortcoming was addressed by using a 1-year follow up, after which time placebo response would be diminished. The 1-year follow-up indicated that subjects continued to use SNL and reported fewer nasal symptoms. This continued voluntary use is a very strong indicator that the procedure is worthwhile, and also indicates that the wishes of 80% of Hölmstrom’s group to continue voluntary lavage may be a genuine response.

Questionnaires were not standardised. The repeatability of responses is indicated above under ‘Materials and methods’. This poor repeatability casts doubts upon the results shown in Table 1. Nevertheless, the strongly significant (p < 0.0001) and consistent (during the cross-over trial and at 1-year follow-up) reported decrease in
nasal symptoms coupled with a rate of continued regular voluntary usage of approximately 50% (Table 2) suggest nasal problems are probably reduced by SNL.

The most acceptable method of nasal lavage is not determined by this study. Both studies used different methods of SNL, with good reports of ease of teaching, subsequent acceptance and benefits. Hölmstrom et al. used ‘Rhinomer’ which is described as isotonic seawater ‘packed under high pressure, in a plastic bottle for repeated use . . . the pressure in the water stream is adequate for lavage of the nasal cavity . . . three ml of the water is ejected per second’. Jala Neti offers advantages in terms of cost and availability because the cost of the ‘pot’ is $A40, the cost of commercial salt and water is minimal and ingredients (salt and water) are freely available.

If tolerated, SNL using the Jala Neti method is cheap, convenient and has minimal side effects. Therapeutic options for woodworkers with nasal symptoms include nasal vasoconstrictors (which produce tolerance and rebound phenomena) and nasal steroids. Both are expensive. Therapeutic options for those with nasal cancer are quite limited; prevention is better.

There is logical reason to believe that regular SNL could reduce nasal cancer risk, although proof of this would require a longitudinal study with a large number of subjects over several decades.

It is possible that the SNL procedure could be of use in reducing nasal symptoms in other dusty occupations.

The study concludes that the procedure of SNL deserves more attention from industry and training groups. The usefulness of SNL, using different methods, has now been demonstrated in two studies. SNL could be introduced to wood workers during apprenticeships or training as an option to try if nasal symptoms become a problem, if compliance with wearing of personal protection is difficult or if development of nasal cancer is a concern.

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REFERENCES
