Dear Alice,

I am an avid nose-picker. Is this bad for my nose?

? Nosepicker

Answer

Dear Nosepicker,

Calling all noses: Nose picking is a highly common pastime in which most folks (big and small) partake. In fact, some of you may be picking and clicking right now! Having boogers, which are a combination of mucus and dried dirt particles, is actually a sign that your nose is functioning properly. Regardless of how you feel about it, picking your nose carries certain risks, such as bacterial infections, minor injuries, and the potential for discomfort for those around you.

Whether it’s more exposure to bacteria or physical injuries in the nasal passage, here are a few reasons why nose picking may not be the healthiest of habits:

- The nose, mouth, throat, and sinuses are fertile territory for the development of infections. Using a finger as the vehicle can act like a space shuttle for germs, delivering bacteria from a doorknob or keyboard directly into your body (of course, this mode of transit works in the reverse direction too — which is why good hand washing habits are so invaluable!).
- Your fingernails can cause cuts in the nasal passage, whether they're clipped or not. Microscopic lacerations, or cuts — even ones that draw no visible blood — can open the door even wider to bacteria and infections.
- Oil deposits from your fingers can also cause pimples in and around the nose.
- An epistaxis, or nosebleed [2], can occur when pickers dislodge crusts that have formed in the mucous membranes of the nose. For the most vigorous of nose-pickers, there’s a slight risk of breaking blood vessels as well.

Moving on from the self-inflicted consequences, here’s a little bit on the secondhand effects of nose picking. For all you public pickers out there — most people (even closeted nose-pickers) don’t enjoy watching others eating, picking, sticking, or flicking things that come out of noses. You may want to keep this in mind the next time you go digging in public and consider whether picking in private might be more appropriate. Because you describe yourself
as an avid picker, it may be worth mentioning that if you’re worried that this behavior is becoming more of a difficult-to-control habit, it’s wise to talk with a health care provider. Nose picking that causes more serious injuries to the nasal canal or interferes with your daily activities may be associated with obsessive compulsive disorder, but only a medical or mental health professional can provide additional insight into what might be behind the persistent picking behavior.

One final picking precaution? if you’ve got a booger to pick with your nose, safer nose picking is best done with a tissue. But if you must pick without protection: wash up and go easy on the nose.

Alice!

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