

Jala Neti

by Laya Fisher

I was getting desperate. I was about to stick a long metal spout up my nose and pour warm salty water in through one nostril and out the other. Was I kidding myself thinking that this was going to unblock a nose that's been stuffed ever since the doctor slapped me and I took my first broken breath?

Despite my reservations and the muffled laughter of my boyfriend, I continued with my first cautious attempt at the practice of jala neti, an ancient yogic cleansing technique touted by my teacher as a preventative and cure for a cavalcade of chronic respiratory infections and mental malaise. Blessedly, I have not suffered in sniffing silence since.

Over the years I tried allergy shots, anti-histamines, humidifiers and nasal sprays, all of which drained my bank account and emotional reserves but not my sinuses. Born of my desperation and my introduction to jala neti, however, has been a freedom like I've never known before. No more sneezing fits akin to seizures; no more hayfever hangovers. Had any of the many doctors I visited told me about this natural, inexpensive and more effective alternative, I would've saved myself mountains of suffering. It is the aim of this article that you and your nose do not suffer the same fate as I did.

Like a lot of people, I once related the term 'hatha yoga' only to the physical postures, breathing and meditation exercises associated with this path. However, there are also six internal purification practices contained within hatha yoga known as *shatkarmas* – *shat* meaning 'six' and *karma* meaning 'action'.

Originally these mental and physical purification practices were intended for preparation towards the higher states of consciousness in order to attain enlightenment and were originally guarded from all but the most advanced of practitioners. Fortunately for modern man, some of these esoteric practices are now accessible to people from all walks of

life and are highly applicable in helping solve some of the more common health issues our society suffers from today. With the alarming increase in environmental pollution, genetically engineered diets, stress levels and the associated rise in the number of asthmatics and allergy sufferers, jala neti is one of the most relevant of these ancient practices.

Jala neti, or just 'neti' as it is more commonly called in the West, is a process by which a special pot called a 'lota' is filled with warm salted water. This pot has a long straight spout on its end and can be made of ceramic, porcelain, glass, stainless steel or any other material that won't contaminate the water.

The salt used is ideally finely ground and pure sea salt. Salt you'd use for cooking such as table salt isn't ideal because of the anti-caking additives in them, which aren't harmful when ingested in small quantities but can be an irritant to people with sensitive noses.

The temperature of the water should be tepid, around body temperature and the salinity of the water needs to match the saline quality of one's blood or tears. The best measurement is one teaspoon of clean salt per half litre of water.

Once you have filled the neti pot, stand over the sink in your bathroom or go outside and adopt an appropriate stance (see side bar for details) and gently insert the spout into one nostril. The head is tilted so that the opposite nostril is facing down to allow the gentle stream of water to flow in through that nostril and out the other while you continue breathing through your mouth. After half a pot has flowed in one direction, the same process

is repeated on the other side. To dry your nose, the practice is completed with a breathing technique similar to *kapalabhati*. This is to prevent the onset of a cold or infection, since dirty water in the nasal cavity can lead to both conditions.

This practice may seem peculiar to some at first. However, we regularly clean our cars and homes to avoid a build-up of toxins and maintain maximum efficiency, so why wouldn't we pay an equal amount of attention to the vehicle or abode that is our body with an internal cleansing practice like this one? If you've ever been for a swim in the salty sea and felt a much greater depth and clarity in your breathing afterwards, you'll find that neti is a similar all-natural experience.

Neti is a safe practice when done correctly. But the nervousness that many naturally experience during the first few attempts can lead to coughing or spluttering, water not flowing equally in both directions or water not flowing out the nostrils at all. Most often it's due to the incorrect angle of the head or spout, still breathing through the nose (instead of the mouth) while doing the practice, or perhaps due to an excess of heavy mucous. If stinging occurs it's often because of an incorrect proportion of salt to water or the water being the wrong temperature.

Don't let these things put you off. After a few tries the mechanics of the practice become natural and the benefits, which are often immediate, are enough to inspire even the most sceptical person into incorporating it into their daily routines with ease.

Some of these benefits are: a sparkling clean fresh feeling in the nose and head, a refinement of your sense of smell and relief from the debilitating symptoms of itchy eyes, drippy noses, jackhammer headaches and suffocating congestion – plus the regular practise of neti can often prevent their recurrence. Neti also improves the flow of breath through both nostrils, which is especially beneficial before doing any relaxation or meditation technique. And, although yoga teachers most often suggest the doing neti to clear blocked nostrils, the practice is also claimed to have many mental health benefits, including clearing a cluttered mind, alleviating agitation and improving one's powers of concentration and visualisation. In short, it has many benefits for overall health.

How neti works

To understand how something as seemingly simple as running salty water through your nose can impart so many benefits, it helps to be aware of some basic anatomy of the upper respiratory system. Your nose has, as its first line of defence against infection, a layer of tiny microscopic hairs called 'cilia', that help flush out and sweep away any foreign object that enters the nostrils, very similar to the way eyelashes deflect debris from the eyes. These cilia are sensitive and if the climate inside our nose experiences any extreme of temperature or excess of moisture or dryness, they slow down their sweeping motion and consequently become clogged up with dirt, leaving us more susceptible to bacterial invaders. That's when the fine layer of mucous that coats the nasal passages and throat steps in to help. If this mucous lining is unsuccessful and becomes too thick with dirt to be expelled by the normal cleansing mechanism of blowing our nose or coughing it out, we get attacked by the achy ailments associated with infection. The preventative practice of jala neti helps to maintain the optimal climate inside our nose and keep the cilia and mucous lining clean, which increases our odds of staying healthy.

Research shows the benefits of neti

To find out more about jala neti and its benefits, I conducted a short e-mail interview with Dr Thomas Schmidt, one of the world's leading proponents of neti. This is what he told me about his research.

"When working as a research professor in behavioural and preventative medicine and cardiovascular psychophysiology at Hanover Medical University, I had an army doctor, Herbert Plümer, under my guidance, researching for his MD thesis. In 1992 he investigated the effects of jala neti in young healthy army recruits in winter, this being a high-risk group for acute respiratory infections. Two groups, a nasal rinsing and a control group, reported for six weeks in daily diary entries on various respiratory symptoms and indicators of illness. The protective effects were strong and significant. Days lost from work were reduced in the nasal rinsing group by the factor 3.5 during the six-week period. During the last three weeks no soldier practising jala neti became ill. This study was widely cited in the press and TV in Germany."

In order to experience the benefits of neti, Dr. Schmidt recommends that you perform neti twice a day – once in the morning and once at night. For those suffering from colds, allergies or exposure to dust, smoke and other pollutants, it is better, if at all possible, to do it several times throughout the day. "Anyone can practise jala neti," Dr Schmidt asserts. "However there are a few limitations. You should not rinse your nose if your nostrils are sore or inflamed, if you have an injury inside your nose, when suffering a severe nosebleed, or immediately afterwards."

While the practice of neti doesn't guarantee you'll never get the sniffles again, it has certainly transformed this yogini's nose into one that can smell the roses and not be rubbed red raw for days afterwards. I'm no longer single-handedly keeping the tissue industry in business and I've had the last laugh at my boyfriend, who now has a neti pot of his own.

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<how to do neti>



Prepare the water using one teaspoon of clean salt per half litre of lukewarm, body temperature water. Fill the neti pot with the prepared water.

Stand outside or over a sink, with legs slightly apart, knees soft and body weight evenly distributed between the feet.

Gently insert the spout into the right nostril. Form a seal to avoid leakage by applying slight pressure against the side of the nostril. Start breathing through your mouth.

Bend forward from the hips and tilt your head to the left. To make optimal use of the power of gravity, try to have the nostril that you are pouring into in a vertical line above the other one. After a few seconds the water will gradually begin to flow out of the lower nostril (the left one). If it is leaking out of the right nostril or onto your face, adjust the position of your body and the tilt of the pot.

Once the pot has emptied, slowly stand and blow out gently through both nostrils. Repeat on the other side.

To dry the nose

Bend forward and allow your head to hang upside down to drain the nostrils.

Slowly come to standing and then, leaning forward slightly, breathe in and out rapidly through both nostrils 20 times (similar to the action of kapalabhati breathing).

Still leaning forward, tilt head to the left. Place index and middle finger over right nostril and breathe in and out the left nostril rapidly for 20 breaths, emphasising the exhalation. Repeat on the other side.

Disinfect your neti pot regularly with boiling water.