Nasal polyps

What are nasal polyps?
Nasal polyps are small bags of fluid and mucus that protrude into the nasal cavity from the side wall of the nose.

These harmless growths that come through the sinus openings into the nose have a narrow stalk at their base, hence the term polyp. There may be a single polyp or multiple polyps.

What is the cause of nasal polyps?
The basic cause is allergic rhinitis (hay fever), which is an allergic reaction of the nose to irritating particles in the atmosphere.

This causes irritation and inflammation of the mucous membrane lining the sinuses and nasal cavity. This results in overproduction of fluid in the cells of the membrane so that it becomes swollen and engorged with fluid.

This is referred to as oedema. These bags of fluid can enlarge and pop out through the sinus openings into the nasal cavity.

What are the symptoms?
The main symptom is a sense of obstruction or blockage in the affected side or sides of the nose. The degree of blockage depends on the size of the polyp or polyps.

Other symptoms include itchiness and an impaired sense of smell. Occasionally pain in the face and headaches can be experienced if the sinus opening is blocked.

What does a polyp look like?
If you examine the nasal cavity with a light and a mirror you will see pearly grey lumps lying on the floor of the nose.

Your doctor will use a special instrument — a nasal speculum — that looks like a pair of sugar tongs to examine the inside of the nose.

Polyps at the back of the nose can be seen only with another special instrument.

Who gets nasal polyps?
Anyone can get them but they are usually found in adults with a history of allergic rhinitis (hay fever).

What are the risks?
Polyps are usually harmless. They may result in infection of the nose or sinuses, especially if they cause significant obstruction.

What is the treatment?
Treatment can be considered as surgical or medical using medication. In past years treatment was generally surgical removal but these days the emphasis is on medical treatment.

Medical treatment
The drugs used for allergic disorders are the cornerstone of treatment.

Corticosteroids can be given orally (for more severe cases) or intranasally by sprays for smaller polyps.

Aspirin should be avoided in these patients because some may have an aspirin allergy.

Surgical treatment
Surgery is usually reserved for failed medical treatment.

Polyps can be simply removed under local anaesthetic by snaring the base of the polyp with a loop of cutting wire.

More extensive or recurrent polyps may require more sophisticated surgical intervention involving the affected sinuses.

Prevention
This involves early and consistent treatment of allergic rhinitis in these patients, usually with topical nasal corticosteroid sprays.