



EXHALE SINUS

TMJ | HEADACHE | SLEEP

**Why does my ear feel plugged even though I have been told
that my ear looks normal and hearing testing is normal?**

There are many causes for the feeling of fullness or plugging in our ear(s). Even though there are many causes for this feeling, our brain perceives a loss or distortion of information from our ears that results in the symptom of ear plugging, fullness, and/or pressure.

A thorough examination by an ear, nose, and throat specialist can help eliminate many causes such as ear wax, infection, fluid in the ears, holes in the ear drum, inner ear hearing loss, and other rarer conditions.

A common, but underappreciated cause of ear fullness is nasal and sinus congestion. Any restriction to our nasal airway will result in a need to use our facial, neck, and throat muscles to prevent additional obstructions within our throat. To understand this, I use an analogy of a weak, collapsible straw. When we pull air through a straw (sucking as we would from our lungs), the unobstructed straw has some gentle negative pressure on the inside from this action (this is the Bernoulli principle). If the straw becomes partially obstructed yet we try to pull the same amount of air through, we can see the straw begin to collapse inwards. This same physical phenomenon exists in our upper airway. If our nasal airway becomes narrowed (deviated nasal septum, nasal polyps, etc.) we need to pull harder with our lungs to get the same breath in and as a result, we need to support our throat by holding our muscles tighter (this is why mouth breathing doesn't bypass the nasal obstruction completely).

When the obstruction to our nasal airway is relieved, we find that the muscles of our face and neck can relax which can result in nearly instantaneous relief.

Other conditions that result in overuse of the face, neck, and throat muscles (teeth clenching, forward head posture, neck trauma, cervical spinal conditions, etc.) can additionally contribute to the symptom of ear fullness and congestion by straining these same muscles. Relieving nasal airway obstruction in these circumstances may not result in the near-instantaneous relief described above but can lay the groundwork for relaxing the muscles that are the underlying issue.