

Sinus Infections (Sinusitis)

What are sinuses?

There are four pairs of hollow spaces in the bones of your face. These are called sinuses. They are lined with tissue that makes thin, watery mucus. The sinuses are connected to each other and drain through the nose.

What is a sinus infection?

A sinus infection, or sinusitis (sine-uh-SI-tis), is a swelling of the lining in the sinuses. Acute sinusitis lasts for less than four weeks. Chronic sinusitis lasts for more than 12 weeks.

What causes sinus infections?

The most common cause is a virus, such as the common cold. When you catch a cold, your mucus becomes thick and sticky, and doesn't drain well. Bacteria can grow in the mucus trapped in your sinuses. This can lead to a bacterial sinus infection.

Who gets them?

Anyone can get a sinus infection, but people with nasal allergies, hay fever, or asthma have an increased risk. Other risk factors include exposure to cigarette smoke, nasal polyps (POL-ips), and changes in pressure (such as during flying or scuba diving). Sinus infections can also be caused by a deviated septum, which is when the part of your nose that separates the nostrils is out of place.

What are the symptoms?

- Headache
- Pain or pressure in the forehead, cheeks, nose, or between the eyes
- Fever
- Nasal congestion and runny nose
- Cough that may be worse at night
- Sore throat
- Decreased sense of smell and taste
- Tiredness
- Bad breath

How are they treated?

Only about two out of 100 people with cold symptoms will get a bacterial sinus infection. Antibiotics can treat bacterial infections, but not viral infections. Most people do not need antibiotics. Having a green or yellow nasal discharge does not necessarily mean that you need antibiotics.

If you have had symptoms for less than one week, try the following:

- Drink plenty of fluids to keep your mucus thin
- Sleep with your head propped up, or with the pain-free side of your face on the pillow
- Inhale steam three or four times a day (for example, sit in the bathroom with a hot shower running)
- Use a salt-water nasal spray or a nasal cup to loosen mucus
- Use over-the-counter pain medicine to help with pain and headaches



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- Put a warm, wet towel against your face to help with pain
- Take an over-the-counter decongestant to help your sinuses drain, but avoid antihistamines, which make mucus thick

Call your doctor if:

- Your symptoms last longer than seven days or if they are getting worse
- You have a fever above 101°F
- You have a bad headache that does not improve with over-the-counter pain medicine
- You have vision changes or swelling around your eyes
- Your symptoms continue after you have taken all of your antibiotics

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Education Resource
Web site: <http://familydoctor.org/686>

American Academy of Otolaryngology–
Head and Neck Surgery
Web site: <http://www.entnet.org/healthInformation/Sinusitis.cfm>

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
Web site: <http://www3.niaid.nih.gov/topics/sinusitis>

National Library of Medicine
Web site: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/sinusitis.html>

Notes:

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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