

Sinusitis

What are sinuses?

The air chambers in the bone behind your cheeks, eyebrows and jaw are called sinuses. They make mucus, a fluid that cleans bacteria and other particles out of the air you breathe. Tiny hairs called cilia (say: "sill-ee-ah") sweep mucus out of your sinuses so it can drain out through your nose.

What is sinusitis?

Sinusitis (say: "sine-you-site-iss") is the name for a condition in which the lining of your sinuses becomes inflamed.

What causes sinusitis?

Anything that causes swelling in your sinuses or keeps the cilia from moving mucus can cause sinusitis. This can occur because of changes in temperature or air pressure. Using decongestant nasal sprays too much, smoking, and swimming or diving can also increase your risk of getting sinusitis. Some people have growths called polyps (say: "pawl-ips") that block their sinus passages.

When sinusitis is caused by a bacterial or viral infection, you get a sinus infection. Sinus infections sometimes occurs after you've had a cold. The cold virus attacks the lining of your sinuses, causing them to swell and become narrow. Your body responds to the virus by producing more mucus, but it gets blocked in your swollen sinuses. This built-up mucus makes a good place for bacteria to grow. The bacteria can cause a sinus infection.

What are the signs of acute sinusitis?

A cold that starts to get better and then gets worse may be a sign of acute sinusitis. Pain or pressure in some areas of the face (forehead, cheeks or between the eyes) is often a sign of blocked sinus drainage and can be a sign of acute sinusitis. Pain in your forehead that starts when you lean forward can also be a sign. Other symptoms may include a stuffy nose, fever and an ache in your upper teeth.

How is acute sinusitis treated?

Your doctor may prescribe an antibiotic (medicine that kills bacteria). You may take an antibiotic for 10 to 14 days, but you will usually start feeling better a couple of days after you start taking it. It is important to take this medicine exactly as your doctor tells you and to continue taking it until it is gone, even after you're feeling better. If you have sinus pain or pressure, your doctor may prescribe or recommend a decongestant to help your sinuses drain.

See the box below for other things you can do to feel better when you have acute sinusitis.

Tips on taking care of sinusitis

- Get plenty of rest. Lying down can make your sinuses feel more stopped-up, so try lying on the side that lets you breathe the best.
- Sip hot liquids and drink plenty of fluids.
- Apply moist heat by holding a warm, wet towel against your face or breathing in steam through a cloth or towel.
- Talk with your doctor before using an over-the-counter cold medicine. Some cold medicines can make your symptoms worse or cause other problems.
- Don't use a nose spray with a decongestant in it for more than 3 days. If you use it for more than 3 days, the swelling in your sinuses may get worse when you stop the medicine.
- Use an over-the-counter medicine such as acetaminophen (one brand name: Tylenol) for pain.
- Rinse your sinus passages with a saline solution. You can buy an over-the-counter saline solution or ask your doctor how to make one at home.

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This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

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