

Sinusitis

What is sinusitis?

When you have sinus problems, they're sometimes caused by a condition called sinusitis. Sinusitis is an inflammation, or swelling, of the sinuses. Sinuses are the air passages behind your cheekbones, eyebrows and jaw. Chronic sinusitis lasts from several weeks to several months. Symptoms include pain in the face, head or neck, a runny nose, a cough that's often worse at night, and not feeling well in general.

What causes sinusitis?

Sinusitis can be caused by infections, allergies or medicines. It can also occur as a result of changes in temperature, air pressure and irritants in the air. A cold can put you at risk of sinusitis. Overusing decongestant nasal sprays, smoking, and swimming and diving may also increase your risk of getting sinusitis. Nasal polyps and other problems with the sinuses also increase your chance of getting sinusitis.

How is sinusitis treated?

The first approach to treatment includes making some changes in your personal habits and your environment. Your habits and your environment can both affect the severity of your symptoms.

What changes can I make in my personal habits?

Although sleep is important to help you feel healthy, too much sleep may worsen your sinus symptoms. This happens because lying down increases nasal congestion. If only one side of your sinuses is affected, try lying on the side that isn't congested when you go to sleep.

For some people who have chronic sinusitis, exercise helps reduce congestion by increasing nasal discharge. For other people, exercise can worsen symptoms. You may want to try exercise to see if it helps you.

If your eyeglasses pinch your nasal bridge, your symptoms may get worse. Make sure your glasses fit well.

Diet seems to affect sinus symptoms in some people, although no medical studies really support a connection between foods and sinusitis. If you believe your symptoms are related to a food, you might try avoiding that food to see if it helps.

What about changing my environment?

Air pollution can make sinus symptoms much worse. Special air filters, called high-efficiency particulate air filters and electrostatic filters, can be helpful in reducing irritants inside buildings. Some climates are worse than others for people who have chronic sinusitis. The damp weather in northern areas is usually the worst. Changes in air pressure can also cause symptoms in some people. For example, some people with chronic sinusitis feel worse just before a rainstorm, when the air pressure is changing.

Does steam help reduce the symptoms of sinusitis?

Steam can be very helpful in relieving congestion. You can use steam inhalations with or without astringents such as eucalyptus, pine oil or menthol. Simply breathing in the steam from a cup of hot water works. You can also place a damp cloth heated in the microwave over your face, but make sure you don't burn yourself.

Humidifiers are helpful, especially in the colder months. They help prevent drying, irritation and swelling of the membranes lining the sinuses and nose. They also loosen mucus, so it's easier to get rid of.

Are nasal sprays helpful?

Saline nasal sprays help moisten dry nasal membranes and help make the mucus wetter and easier to remove. Wetting agents, such as propylene and polyethylene glycol, may also be helpful. Saline nasal rinses can also be helpful. The saline rinse can be prepared at home by mixing 1/4 teaspoon of table salt with 7 ounces of warm water. Use a bulb syringe to squirt the liquid into your nostrils and rinse the sinuses.

Nasal sprays that contain decongestants are useful for treatment over short periods. Use them only three times a day for no more than three days. If you use them too much, you may have a rebound effect, which means that when you stop using them your symptoms will be much worse.

Nasal sprays that contain corticosteroids may be helpful if you have allergies. Your doctor may prescribe them for you.

What about oral medicines?

Helpful oral medicines include decongestants. They are often useful in reducing congestion. Antihistamine medicines can be helpful if you have allergies. Corticosteroid pills can also help reduce symptoms in some people. Antibiotics are only useful if there is a bacterial infection of the sinuses.

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.

Visit familydoctor.org for more useful information on this and many other health-related topics.

Permission is granted to reproduce this material for nonprofit educational purposes. Written permission is required for other uses, including electronic uses.