

Perhaps it's Not Just the Sniffles!

You've developed a cold that has lasted longer than a week. You're having trouble breathing through your nose. When you lean forward, you feel a throbbing pain in your face. When you roll over in bed you can feel the fluid in your sinuses shifting. You may not have a simple cold any more. Instead, you might have developed sinusitis, an infection of the sinus cavities.

Sinuses are air-filled, hollow spaces or cavities within the facial bones around your nose. When their linings become infected, usually because of viruses or bacteria, they may swell causing an obstruction and interfering with the normal drainage of mucus.

As this drainage becomes blocked, it creates an environment in which bacteria and viruses trapped in the sinuses can grow. Sinusitis can cause considerable discomfort and can lead to more serious infections if left untreated.

Although sinusitis can become a chronic condition, most cases are short-lived (acute) and respond to treatment in about two weeks. Signs and symptoms of acute sinusitis may include:

- Congestion that makes it difficult for you to breathe through your nose
- Yellow or greenish nasal discharge
- Pain, tenderness and swelling around your eyes, cheeks, nose or forehead
- Fever and chills
- Reduced sense of smell or taste
- Cough
- Tooth pain
- Bad breath
- Fatigue
- Ear pain

If you have three or more signs and symptoms for longer than a week, you might have sinusitis. Conditions other than colds may cause you to develop sinus obstructions and a susceptibility to sinusitis. These include:

- Allergies. Inflammation that occurs with allergies may block your sinuses.
- Deviated nasal septum. In this condition, the wall between the nostrils (the nasal septum) is crooked. This may restrict or block the sinus passages, creating an environment for infections.
- Nasal polyps. These growths of tissue may restrict the nasal passages, slowing drainage and allow infections to grow

The blockages associated with sinusitis can become worse if you smoke or are exposed to air pollution. Your doctor can evaluate your symptoms and ask if you have had a recent cold, whether you have allergies and whether you smoke.

During a physical examination, your doctor may feel for tenderness in the area of the sinuses and examine your nasal passages looking for inflammation, secretions or deformities. He or she may use a thin tube with a light (endoscope) to look at your nasal passages.

Sixty to 70 percent of people with acute sinusitis get better without antibiotics. If you haven't had sinusitis before and your symptoms are mild, try using over-the-counter decongestants and pain relievers. If your symptoms do not improve within three days, contact your doctor.

Take these steps to reduce your risk of sinusitis:

- Reduce your risk of upper respiratory infections. Minimize close contact with people who have colds and wash your hands frequently with soap and water.
- Don't smoke. Tobacco smoke can cause irritation and inflammation of the lining of the sinuses and nose. Inflammation can result in blocked nasal passages.
- Avoid polluted air. Contaminants in the air, whether indoors or outdoors, can irritate and inflame your lungs and nasal passages.

If you do get sinusitis, these steps can help relieve symptoms:

- Steam your sinuses. By inhaling steam several times a day, you'll stimulate drainage from the sinuses. Lean over a bowl of hot water for a few minutes with a towel draped over your head and the bowl to keep the steam directed toward your face.
- Apply warm compresses. Place warm, damp cloth compresses around your nose, cheeks and eyes to ease facial pain.
- Drink fluids. Dilute secretions and promote drainage by consuming at least six 8-ounce glasses of fluid daily.
- Take an over-the-counter decongestant. Nasal spray decongestants such as oxymetazoline (Afrin, Nostrilla) or phenylephrine (Neo-Synephrine, Vicks Sinex), can relieve nasal obstructions and increase sinus drainage. However, over time, these products may make your nasal congestion worse.
- Don't drink alcohol. Drinking alcohol can worsen the swelling of the lining of the sinuses and nose.

Happy Holidays!!