



## Important questions about your sinuses

By Cecelia Damask, DO

### **Q. How common is sinusitis?**

**A.** More than 37 million Americans suffer from at least one episode of acute sinusitis each year. The prevalence of sinusitis has soared in the last decade possibly due to increased pollution, urban sprawl, allergies, and increased resistance to antibiotics.

### **Q. What is sinusitis?**

**A.** Sinusitis is an inflammation of the membrane lining of any sinus. Acute sinusitis is a short-term condition that responds well to antibiotics and decongestants; chronic sinusitis is characterized by at least four recurrences of acute sinusitis in a 12-month period.

### **Q. What are the signs and symptoms of acute sinusitis?**

**A.** For acute sinusitis, symptoms include facial pain/pressure, nasal obstruction, nasal discharge, and diminished sense of smell. Additionally, sufferers may have fever, bad breath, fatigue, dental pain, and cough. This condition may be present when a sufferer has two or more of the aforementioned symptoms and/or the presence of thick, green or yellow nasal discharge.

### **Q. How is acute sinusitis treated?**

**A.** Acute sinusitis is generally treated with 10 to 14 days of

antibiotics. With treatment, the symptoms disappear. Oral and topical decongestants also help to alleviate symptoms.

### **Q. What are the signs and symptoms of chronic sinusitis?**

**A.** Victims of chronic sinusitis may have the following symptoms for 12 weeks or more: facial pain/pressure, facial congestion/fullness, nasal obstruction/blockage, thick nasal discharge/discolored post-nasal drainage, pus in the nasal cavity, and at times, fever. They may also have headache, bad breath, and fatigue.

### **Q. What measures can be taken to relieve sinus pain?**

**A.** Warm moist air may alleviate sinus congestion. Experts recommend a vaporizer or steam. Humidifiers should be used only when a clean filter is in place to preclude spraying bacteria or fungal spores into the air. Warm compresses are useful in relieving pain in the nose and sinuses. Saline nasal sprays are also helpful in moisturizing the nasal passages.

### **Q. How effective are nonprescription nose drops or sprays?**

**A.** Use of nonprescription drops or sprays might help control symptoms. However, extended use of nonprescription decongestant nasal sprays could aggravate symptoms and should not be used beyond their label recommendation. Saline nasal sprays are safe for continuous use.

### **Q. How does a physician determine the best treatment for acute or chronic sinusitis?**

**A.** To obtain the best treatment option, the physician needs to properly assess the patient's history and symptoms and then progress through a structured physical examination.

### **Q. What should one expect during the physical examination for sinusitis?**

**A.** At a specialist's office, the patient will receive a thorough ear, nose, and throat examination.

### **Q. What other diagnostic procedures might be taken?**

**A.** Other diagnostic tests may include a culture, endoscopy, allergy testing, or CT scan of the sinuses.

### **Q. What is nasal endoscopy?**

**A.** An endoscope is a special fiber optic instrument for the examination of the nasal passages. It allows a visual examination of the nose and sinus drainage areas.

### **Q. Why does an ear, nose, and throat specialist perform nasal endoscopy?**

**A.** Nasal endoscopy offers the physician specialist a reliable, visual view of the accessible areas of the sinus drainage pathways. The patient's nasal cavity is anesthetized; an endoscope is then used to view the nasal cavity. The procedure is utilized to observe signs of obstruction as well as detect nasal polyps hidden from routine nasal examination. During the endoscopic examination, the physician specialist also looks for pus as well as polyp formation and structural abnormalities that may cause recurrent sinusitis.

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**Q. What course of treatment will the physician recommend?**

**A.** To reduce congestion, the physician may prescribe nasal sprays, nose drops, or oral decongestants. Antibiotics will be prescribed for a bacterial infection found in the sinuses (antibiotics are not effective against a viral infection). Antihistamines may be recommended for treatment of allergies.

**Q. Will changes in lifestyle be suggested during treatment?**

**A.** Smoking should never be condoned, but if you are a smoker, it is important to refrain during treatment for sinus problems. A special diet is not required, but drinking extra fluids will help to thin mucus.

**Q. When is sinus surgery necessary?**

**A.** Mucus is developed by the body to act as a lubricant. In the sinus cavities, the lubricant is moved across mucous membrane linings toward the opening of each sinus by millions of cilia (a mobile extension of a cell). Inflammation from allergies causes membrane swelling and the sinus opening to narrow, thereby blocking mucus movement. If antibiotics are not effective, sinus surgery can correct the problem. Controlling allergies with allergy shots or allergy drops will help decrease membrane swelling and inflammation.

**Q. What does the surgical procedure entail?**

**A.** The endoscopic surgical procedure is performed under general anesthesia. Patients return to normal activities within a week; full recovery takes about four weeks.

**Q. What does sinus surgery accomplish?**

**A.** The surgery should enlarge the natural opening to the sinuses, leaving as many cilia in place as possible. Otolaryngologists have found endoscopic surgery to be highly effective in restoring normal function to the sinuses. The procedure removes areas of obstruction, resulting in the normal flow of mucus.

**Q. What are the consequences of untreated infected sinuses?**

**A.** Not seeking treatment for sinusitis will result in unnecessary pain and discomfort. In rare circumstances, meningitis or brain abscess and infection of the bone or bone marrow can occur.

**Q. Where should sinus pain sufferers seek treatment?**

**A.** If you suffer from severe sinus pain, you should seek treatment from an otolaryngologist, a specialist who can treat your condition with medical and/or surgical remedies.

An otolaryngologist can also treat any underlying allergies that cause inflammation in the nasal cavity leading to obstruction of the sinus drainage pathways and thereby causing recurrent infections. Children suffer from allergies as well. Allergic inflammation can cause swelling in the nose and around the opening of the Eustachian tube (ear canal) that has the potential to interfere with drainage of the ear.

*Dr. Damask is a board-certified otolaryngologist, a physician who practices the medical management of diseases of the ears, nose, and throat. Her specialty is in the treatment of allergies. Dr. Damask attended medical school in Chicago, and was in private practice in North Carolina prior to opening Lake Mary Ear, Nose, Throat & Allergy.*

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