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Sinus Headache

What is a sinus headache?

A sinus headache is a headache that occurs because your sinuses are swollen closed or congested with mucus. The sinuses are hollow spaces in the bones of your face. They connect with the nose through small openings. Like the nose, they are lined with membranes that make mucus. Mucus drains through the small openings to the nose.

How does it occur?

If you have a cold or allergies, the openings of your sinuses may be blocked by excess mucus or a swelling of the tissue that lines the sinuses. When drainage of mucus from the sinuses is blocked, the sinuses become congested. They may become infected with bacteria, a virus, or even fungus. The infection can make the sinuses even more clogged. The pressure caused by swelling and congestion causes sinus headaches.

Most sinus problems happen when you have had a cold. Often hay fever or irritation from dust or smoke causes swelling of the sinuses. Sometimes a tooth infection spreads to the sinuses.

If you have injured the bones in your nose or have a deformity of the nose that causes the sinuses not to drain properly, you may be more likely to get sinus congestion and infection.

What are the symptoms?

Some symptoms of a sinus headache are:

- pain or pressure in the forehead or around the eyes and cheeks
- tender skin and tender bones over and under the eyes.

Blowing your nose, stooping down, or jarring your head (as might happen when you jog or do aerobics) may make your headache feel worse.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask about your symptoms and examine you. You may have an x-ray and possibly a CT scan to look for swelling, fluid, or small benign growths (polyps) in the sinuses.

How is it treated?

Aspirin, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen can help relieve pain. Your health care provider may prescribe a decongestant. If your provider suspects you have a sinus infection, he or she may also prescribe an antibiotic. Antihistamines may help if allergies are a cause.

How long will the effects last?

Your head should stop hurting when the sinuses become less congested. This usually takes about 1 to 3 days after you start treatment.

How can I take care of myself?

- Avoid smoke, other inhaled irritants, and allergens, such as animal dander.
- Add moisture to the air with a humidifier or a vaporizer, unless you have mold allergy (mold may grow in your vaporizer).
- Inhale steam from a basin of hot water or shower to relieve pain.
- Put warm, moist washcloths on your face.
- Use decongestants as directed. Never use nonprescription nasal spray decongestants for more than 3 days. After 3 days they may cause your symptoms to get worse.
- Get plenty of rest and drink a lot of water.
- Elevate your head in bed, but only slightly.
- Take all of your medicine as prescribed.

Call your health care provider if:

- Your headache is not relieved by the medicine and other symptoms do not go away in 3 to 5 days.
- You have a fever over 102°F (38.9°C) or foul-smelling discharge from your nose.
- Your nose is bleeding.
- Swelling over your forehead, eyes, nose, or cheeks has gotten worse.
- Your vision is blurred or double, or you have problems with balance.

How can I help prevent sinus headaches?

- Treat the problems that might cause the headaches, such as allergies.
- Use oral or nasal decongestants before you fly, travel to high altitudes, or swim in deep water.
- Use a humidifier in your home if the air is particularly dry (for example, if you wake up in the morning with a dry mouth).

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