

What is sinusitis?

Sinusitis is an inflammation of the sinuses, which are air-filled cavities adjacent to the nose and are lined by mucus membrane. Of the several sinuses, those most likely to be affected are the frontal sinuses (in the forehead just above the eyes), the ethmoidal sinuses (between the eyes) and the maxillary sinuses (in the cheekbones). The maxillary sinuses are the most commonly affected.

Sinusitis can be divided into acute (sudden onset) and chronic (persistent).

What is the cause?

The common cause is a viral upper respiratory infection involving the nose and which spreads to the sinuses. The mucus membranes lining the nasal cavity connects with those that line the sinuses. The swollen membranes can block the openings of the sinuses to the nose and secondary infection by bacteria that normally live in the nose can complicate the infection.

Other causes include irritation to the nasal airways from allergies, extreme cold, smoking, a foreign body in the nose or jumping into water without holding the nose.

What are the symptoms?

Depending on which sinus is involved the symptoms include:

- worsening of the cold with blocked nose and green-yellow discharge
- feeling of pressure inside the head
- feeling quite ill
- fever
- discharge from the nose
- headache over one or both eyes, worse upon waking in the morning or when bending forwards
- nasal speech with difficulty breathing through the nose
- post-nasal drip, maybe purulent (containing pus)
- cheek pain resembling toothache
- nose bleeding (occasional).

The development of feeling ill with fever and pain indicates the presence of bacterial sinusitis.

What is the treatment?

Self-help

In the early stages of a viral infection it is worth treating the condition vigorously with rest, steam inhalations, aspirin or paracetamol and decongestants (tablets or nasal sprays). Blow your nose as often as necessary into tissues and then destroy them.

Medical help

Your doctor will advise on the best way to use decongestants

Antibiotics

These are usually prescribed for bacterial infection only.

What are the complications?

Sinusitis invariably clears up rapidly and antibiotics, if necessary, are very effective. If mucus and pus accumulate and do not resolve by draining properly, it may be necessary to drain the sinus or sinuses surgically. Often it persists as chronic sinusitis.

Chronic sinusitis

Sometimes the infection does not totally clear up and the sinus remains blocked with milder symptoms such as:

- a stuffy feeling in the head
- blocked nose
- constant nasal dripping, often offensive
- vague pain in the cheeks
- toothache
- halitosis (bad breath)
- malaise (i.e. feeling unwell).

The treatment for chronic sinusitis is similar for acute sinusitis especially using nasal inhalations and decongestants under medical supervision. It may be worth taking 2 grams of vitamin C a day for at least 10 days.

