

I think I have a sinus infection

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

You may, but chances are it is a viral infection. Sinus pain, post-nasal drip, facial soreness are all symptoms of sinus congestion---but not necessarily a "bacterial infection".

- 95% of the time sinus symptoms are caused by viral infections
- Mucosal swelling leads to that 'blocked up' feeling
- Mucus starts to drain down the throat triggering the need to clear the throat and cough.
- The color of our mucus may change
- Blood-tinged mucus is from disturbances of small vessels in the swollen nasal tissues
- Ears can feel plugged intermittently
- Throats can be sore, especially on awakening.

When might bacteria be the culprit?

If the symptoms are lasting for more than 7-10 days, if the symptoms are worsening despite trying decongestants, if a fever is persistent or if the symptoms are occurring on one-side of the face. Taking an immunosuppressive medicine can make one more prone to bacterial process.

To treat the sinus symptoms:

TRY a decongestant---these are medicines that decrease the swelling of the sinus tissues.

1) Oxymetazoline nasal spray---(Afrin is a common brand). This is an over-the-counter (OTC) nasal spray that usually costs < \$5. It works quickly and isn't absorbed systemically so has few side effects. It won't make you tired or jittery but there is ONE important side effect: It

should be used only for about 3-4 days. Using it for more than 5 days can lead to rebound nasal congestion-- won't happen if used as recommended.

A good way to use this medication is to first get the spray mechanism primed---give a few sprays in the air so you have a nice spritz coming out. Place the nozzle into your nostril and squeeze of the bottle. No need to sniff or tilt your head. Wait 5 minutes--then repeat this procedure for a total of 3 sprays. The 5 minutes of waiting allow tissue to open, so that each subsequent spray reaches a bit higher in the nose. You can use this nasal spray every 12 hours x 3-4 days and then STOP.

2) Pseudoephedrine is an effective decongestant in pill form. It comes in a 4 hour and 12 hour preparation. It's in the stimulant family of medicines, the side effects are similar to caffeine; don't take it right before bed. This medication needs to be purchased from a pharmacist by showing an ID and can be used as long as you are experiencing congestion.

There is a version of Pseudoephedrine that is combined with an antihistamine--sold as Aprodine or Actifed. This is a great choice at bedtime: the pseudoephedrine component will open the nose and the antihistamine component will stop the cough and cause sleepiness.

3) Phenylephrine is another oral decongestant. This is the medicine in the cold medication Dayquil and many other OTC products. Phenylephrine is much less effective as a decongestant compared to Pseudoephedrine.

4) Mucinex is “guaifenesin”—the same medication that is in Robitussin. It is a mucolytic---it thins mucus secretions. It is not a decongestant but can help loosen mucus.

5) Nasal steroids like Flonase can be very helpful. This medication is currently both OTC and prescription medication. Because it is an anti-inflammatory, it reduces swelling and decreases mucus production. Some with allergies use it for weeks or months-- unlike oxymetazoline nasal spray which is used for 3-4 days only. There are other prescription nasal steroids available by prescription.

MOISTURISING the nose is a very helpful practice. A wet nose is a healthy nose! The inside of the nose can get dried out. Mucus then gets thick and adherent---hard to move out. Taking a shower can offer a short lived reprieve. Heating and air conditioning systems and medicines used to treat sinus congestion all contribute to this dryness. Using a Sinus Rinse or a Neti Pot, two different tools with similar goals, can wet the nose, decrease swelling, and help move the mucous out.

6) Nasal/sinus irrigation: This effective self care practice involves rinsing the nose and sinus opening with sterile salt water. Sinus rinse and Neti Pot are easy to use and available in pharmacies. (If you are very congested, it can be helpful to use a decongestant before trying to do the sinus rinse. A very swollen nose will prevent the salt water from getting anywhere.)

Sterile or distilled water is needed for this technique---tap water is NOT recommended. Some people try to do this morning and night with the onset of cold symptoms to keep the sinuses as clear as possible. Distilled water can be purchased for use with the sinus rinse/neti pot devices.

- You may boil water yourself and use it once cooled.

- Sea salt or Kosher salt should be used with these devices—not table salt

This video is a video of an ENT doctor using Sinus Rinse:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fj7dOUhogg6s>.

7) Saline nasal spray: This gentle spray is a simple way to moisturize and wet the nasal passages. “Simply Saline” and “Ayr” are two products that may work well.

8)Humidifier/Vaporizer: If your sleeping space is very dry, consider adding moisture to the air with a humidifier or vaporizer. Taking a shower morning and night to moisten things is helpful too.

9) Increase hydration: Drink lots of hot tea or hot water----these help moisturize the nasopharynx.

10)Pain relievers: acetaminophen or ibuprofen can be used--but if you aren't in pain and don't have a fever, these medications aren't needed.

11) Cough lozenges: Lozenges are an OTC option to help soothe your throat

12) Rest

If you have questions or special concerns about your symptoms, don't hesitate to call Health Services. Our staff is available to help. However the above mentioned steps for treating sinus congestion are a great start.

Viral upper respiratory infections get better by taking care of yourself over time.