

# Sinus Problems

**Sinuses are air-filled spaces within the bones around the nose. They are connected to each other, the nose and the throat. Sinuses can become inflamed and blocked, usually due to allergy, irritation or infection. Sinus problems can often be effectively treated with medicines available from a pharmacist.**

Inflammation of a sinus is called sinusitis. Sinusitis may be an acute (short term) condition lasting a few days or weeks, or a chronic (long term) condition lasting many months or years.

## Signs and symptoms

Symptoms of sinus problems include:

- Blocked nose and sinuses (congestion)
- Pain, discomfort or pressure over the area of the affected sinus. Lying down or bending forwards often worsens the discomfort.
- Postnasal drip (fluid from the sinuses and nose constantly drips down the back of the throat), which can lead to constant coughing

- Yellow or green mucus in nose or throat
- Loss of sense of smell or taste
- Headache
- Tiredness
- Bad breath, bad taste in mouth
- A feeling of pressure or fullness in the ears
- Toothache
- Sore throat
- Nausea
- Fever.

## Causes of sinus problems

Sinus problems occur when the lining of a sinus becomes inflamed and swollen, or when normal mucus drainage from a sinus is blocked.

Things that can cause inflammation and swelling of the lining of the sinuses include:

- Infection – may be viral (e.g. the common cold) or bacterial. Tooth and gum infections can also spread into the sinuses
- Allergy (e.g. to pollens, dust mites, moulds, animals)
- Irritation (e.g. by cigarette smoke, chlorine and other chemicals, some foods)
- Atmospheric pressure changes (e.g. air travel or underwater swimming)
- Some medicines (e.g. long-term use of decongestant nasal sprays)
- Some medical conditions
- Stress.

Normal mucus drainage from the sinuses can be blocked by:

- Swollen linings of the nose and sinuses
- Excess mucus
- Physical obstruction (e.g. nasal polyps, broken nose).

## Treatment of sinus problems

A variety of medicines and other treatments can help sinus problems. Most are available from a pharmacist without a prescription. Some medicines for sinus problems should not be used by young children, pregnant or breastfeeding women or people with certain medical conditions

(e.g. diabetes, glaucoma, high blood pressure). Some can interfere with other medicines. Always ask a pharmacist or a doctor for advice.

## Medicines

### Decongestants

- Decongestants may shrink the swollen lining of the nose and sinuses (i.e. reduce congestion). They are available as tablets, syrups and nasal sprays and drops.
- Decongestant nasal sprays and drops should not be used for more than five days in a row.
- A pharmacist can advise on the correct way to use nasal sprays and drops.
- Check with a doctor or pharmacist before giving to children.

### Pain relievers

Decongestants can relieve sinus pain by reducing congestion. Simple pain relievers such as paracetamol and ibuprofen can also give relief.

**Note:** Aspirin should not be given to children under 16 years of age, unless advised by a doctor

### Antihistamines

- Antihistamines may reduce nose and sinus secretions (e.g. runny nose, post nasal drip), especially when due to allergy.
- Some oral antihistamines cause drowsiness; others do not – ask a pharmacist.
- Some sinus products contain a combination of a decongestant with an antihistamine.

- Check with a doctor or pharmacist before giving to children.

### Corticosteroids

- Corticosteroids can reduce and prevent inflammation of the linings of the nose and sinuses, especially when due to allergy.
- Corticosteroid nasal sprays, used regularly, can help treat and also prevent sinusitis.
- Sometimes a doctor will prescribe a short course of tablets (e.g. prednisolone) to treat severe sinusitis.
- Check with a doctor or pharmacist before giving to children.

### Antibiotics

Antibiotics may be prescribed by a doctor to treat a bacterial sinus infection.

### Other treatments

- Saline (salt water) nose spray or sinus rinse can help to loosen and remove mucus in the nose and sinuses.
- Steam inhalations can help to reduce nose and sinus congestion. Medicated inhalations (e.g. menthol, eucalyptus) may also help. Check with a doctor or pharmacist before giving to children.
- A comfortably hot compress (e.g. face washer) held against the face can relieve discomfort.

### Self care

- Drink plenty of fluids to help thin mucus. This will help the sinuses to drain better. Drink at least enough water every day to satisfy your thirst

## Important

Seek medical advice if you have:

- Symptoms for more than 10 days
- Repeated sinus problems (more than 3 times per year)
- Fever (temperature over 38.5oC)
- Pain, swelling or redness on face or around eyes
- Ear ache
- Swollen glands in the neck
- Wheezing or shortness of breath
- Severe headache
- Stiff neck
- Eyesight changes
- Unusual drowsiness or confusion.
- A child with symptoms of a sinus problem.

and keep your urine light-coloured (unless a doctor advises not to).

- Blow your nose gently, clearing one nostril at a time. Blowing your nose forcefully may force mucus into the sinuses.
- Get plenty of rest
- Avoid irritant chemicals and allergens that commonly cause sinus problems (e.g. cigarette smoke, pollen, dust mites, moulds and pets). Clean the house regularly and use a face mask when working outside.
- Don't smoke.
- Limit alcohol – alcohol can worsen sinusitis.

## For more information

### **Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy**

Website: [www.allergy.org.au](http://www.allergy.org.au)

### **Healthdirect Australia**

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

### **Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### **NPS: Better choices, Better health**

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### **The Poisons Information Centre**

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

***Pharmacists are medicines experts.  
Ask a pharmacist for advice when  
choosing a medicine.***

## Related fact cards

- » *Colds and Flu*
- » *Coughs*
- » *Ear Problems*
- » *Hay fever*
- » *Headache*
- » *Medicines and Driving (website only – ask your pharmacist)*
- » *Pain Relievers*

Your Self Care Pharmacy: