

# Sinusitis

Lots of people with ME seem to suffer from sinusitis at some time or other, and this is not surprising because the condition is connected with weakened immunity and with allergies. Sinusitis can be a short illness which strikes during a cold, or it can be chronic, occurring with a long term infection or an allergy such as hay fever. As for the ME connection, there is some research on “Differences in Baseline Nasal Secretions Between Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Control Subjects” (see [www.immunesupport.com](http://www.immunesupport.com)) but this is controversial and outside our scope here.

## **What is sinusitis?**

A ‘sinus’ means any ‘gap’ in the human body, but the sinuses we are concerned with are hollow air spaces in the skull or bones of the head surrounding the nose. Each sinus has an opening into the nose for the passage of air and mucus, and each is joined to the nasal passages by a continuous mucous membrane lining.

Anything that causes a swelling in the nose, such as an infection or allergic reaction, can also affect the sinuses. Blockages of air and trapped mucous secretions cause pressure on the sinus wall and the intense pain of a sinus attack.

The location of the pain and tenderness depends on which sinus is affected and this can include the forehead, the upper jaw, the cheeks and teeth, near the tear ducts of the eyes, at the sides of the nose and even the ears, the nose and the top of the head. But most people with sinusitis have pain and tenderness in several places and it is not easy to tell which sinus is affected.

Sinus congestion feels like a ‘face headache’. Headache when you wake up in the morning is typical of a sinus problem, together with fever, weakness, tiredness, a cough, nasal congestion and usually a thick nasal discharge. There may also be a sore throat caused by drainage of mucus from the sinuses down the back of the throat (“post nasal drip”) but with sinusitis there is not always necessarily a runny nose.

## **What causes sinusitis?**

Sinusitis can be acute, chronic or recurrent, but the causes and treatment are similar for all three. Most cases start with a common cold, caused by a virus. Congestion causes the sinus openings to become too narrow to drain away the mucus, which then stays in the sinus providing a prime site for bacteria to multiply. Common bacteria which we all harbour in the nose and throat, such as *Streptococcus*, then invade the sinus and cause the problems.

There is also a fungal type of sinusitis in people whose immune systems cannot cope with some of the fungi that are abundant in the environment.

Sinusitis can also be caused by allergic rhinitis or hay fever (in a similar mechanism to the above) and also by sensitivities to alcohol, perfumes, tobacco smoke and other environmental conditions. In chronic sinusitis, infection can spread between the sinuses and the lungs, causing persistent inflammation which should certainly be taken to the GP.

## How is it diagnosed?

Sinusitis is different from simple nasal congestion in that it lasts much longer and is accompanied by other symptoms such as weakness, feverishness and a cough that may be worse at night. It is diagnosed by physical examination, together with X-rays and if necessary an MRI or CT scan.

## What help is available?

Your GP might recommend:

- Decongestants to reduce congestion
- Antibiotics to control bacterial infection
- Pain relievers to reduce any pain

**Decongestants** are in the form of nasal drops or sprays. Some are available over the counter and some are steroid based and available only on prescription, but all should be used for a few days only. They could lead to even more congestion if over-used.

The GP might prescribe **antibiotics** if the infection is bacterial.

When medication fails in a case of chronic sinusitis, **surgery** may be considered, and some research studies do suggest that the vast majority of people who undergo surgery have fewer symptoms and better quality of life afterwards. Adults who have had allergic and infectious conditions over the years sometimes develop **nasal polyps** that interfere with proper drainage, and removal of these often provides great relief from sinus symptoms. The most common surgery done today is functional endoscopic sinus surgery, where the natural openings from the sinuses are enlarged to allow drainage. This type of surgery is less invasive than other types, and serious complications are rare.

## Are there alternative treatments?

There are many tried and tested home remedies that can help with this problem.

**Inhaling steam** from a vaporiser or hot cup of water can soothe inflamed sinus cavities. Or get a basin of boiling water and lean over it with a towel over the head, inhaling deeply for ten minutes.

Some find that steam alone works well, whilst others have recommended a warm inhalation of **eucalyptus oil** or a few drops of **Olbas oil** in hot water. **Menthol crystals** are available from chemists, and these are also recommended – dissolve some crystals **CAREFULLY** (as they are powerful) in boiling water, and use as an inhalant.

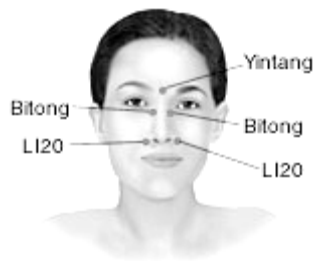
**Gentle heat** applied over the area is soothing. Wringing out a face cloth in hot water and applying over the face is basic hydrotherapy. You can also wrap a hot water bottle in a cloth and place your face against it.

Weleda have a remedy called '**catarrh cream**' which helps open up the nasal passages when a little is smeared in the nostrils. This can be useful at night when congestion worsens.

Overall, **drinking plenty of water** is recommended. As with any inflammatory condition, it is vital to keep the body well hydrated. **Ginger tea** made with fresh ginger is also recommended.

**Acupressure massage**, which you can do yourself, is very helpful to relieve sinusitis. This consists of pressing quite hard with fingers and thumbs on certain points of the face, head and hands. The most useful points can be found on each side of the nostrils (LI20 in the diagram) – pressing hard here with the index fingers for about 30 seconds, and then taking a deep breath, can surprisingly bring relief.

Alternatively, place the thumb and index finger of your left hand on the indentation of the inner eyes, where the bridge of the nose meets the eyebrows. Place your right hand behind the neck, grasping the muscles on either side of the spine with the fingers and the heel of your hand. Put pressure on all four points simultaneously for one minute whilst breathing deeply. Self-help books on acupressure massage, and information can be found on websites, such as [www.wholehealthmd.com/hc/sinusitis/acupressure](http://www.wholehealthmd.com/hc/sinusitis/acupressure).



For severe and painful bouts, there is a home remedy from Ayurvedic (traditional Indian) medicine. Use a garlic press to squeeze **fresh garlic juice**, then put some juice in a dropper. Put a few drops into your nostrils and keep your head back so that the juice stays inside your nose for about 5 minutes. Then sit up and let it drain out into a tissue. Do this no more than once a day for congestion, and no more than 3 times a day (!) for a severe attack.

### How can it be prevented?

There are things we can do to reduce the number of attacks and possibly prevent acute sinusitis from becoming chronic.

It helps to keep your **room temperature** even and not to submit yourself to sudden temperature changes. If you are going out into the cold, wrap up well, of course, including a big scarf, and don't take big gulps of air straight away.

Indoors, if your central heating causes a dry atmosphere, a **humidifier** might help. These cost upwards of £50 but a cheap and cheerful version of this is the water holding reservoirs you can get which attach to radiators (but please note that moist conditions are not helpful for people with allergies).

In the case of **allergens**, it helps of course if you can arrange to keep these down to a minimum! Allergy is a huge area of interest and concern and information is available elsewhere on this. Your GP should be told about allergies and may prescribe anti-histamines, which will in turn reduce the unpleasantness of allergic sinusitis. An **ioniser** is a device that is said to help allergies by putting more negative ions into the atmosphere and reducing the effect of airborne allergens. These are available from department stores from about £20.

To keep the nasal passages clear (and this of course is only for when you are able) a **saline douche** is recommended. A proprietary product is available which is in effect a

commercialisation of the standard yoga practice of neti, when salt water is inhaled through one nostril at a time and expelled through the other - this is certainly helpful after you have been in contact with an allergen, and is recommended for allergy-related sinusitis.

The product which you can buy is called EMCUR Nasal Douche and is available by mail order on 0870 7450 601 [www.emcur.co.uk](http://www.emcur.co.uk). The douche costs around £9.95 and their 'special' salt (bicarb, potassium, sodium and trace elements) costs around £8.95. They also do a nasal spray which costs around £4.95 and a combined kit of 1 douche and 1 carton of salt. There is a postage charge for all products.

For ordinary **nasal rinsing and gargling**, just make a solution of about one small teaspoon of salt to a mug of water – it needs to be brought to about the same saltiness as teardrops or seawater and then is quite comfortable to use (it's very uncomfortable when you get it wrong!). An old fashioned cold remedy is in fact clearing the nose with sea water, which would make good sense if the sea were clean, but nowadays is not recommended! But sea salt is better than table salt for home remedies because it contains some helpful trace minerals.

It is of course important to be well nourished in order to support the immune system and the mucous membranes. Make sure you are getting enough Vitamin C and Vitamin B6 which help prevent inflammation and excessive histamine levels, and also zinc, which strengthens overall immunity. For this we should eat lots of antioxidant rich **fresh fruit and vegetables** plus **seeds**, which are rich in selenium and zinc (such as sunflower, sesame and pumpkin seeds – soak them first for a few hours, and then rinse them, if you find them difficult to digest). Essential fatty acids (as well as being vital in the diet for other reasons) help reduce allergic inflammation and these come from **cold pressed vegetable oils**, especially from the nuts and seeds (do not cook them, but use in dressings).

Some sufferers may be helped by eliminating **wheat** from the diet and it could certainly help to cut out **milk and dairy products** as these encourage mucus production.

### **And finally**

You may like to consider these two different views of the sinuses. Dr Sarah Myhill says of them –

*Whoever designed the human body needs a black mark for putting in sinuses! I don't know of any useful physiological function they perform.*

Whereas Robert Hart (ecologist and author of *The Forest Garden*) says:

*The human being is intended by nature to be a singer. The head has three pairs of sinuses, the only known function of which is to act as resonators corresponding to the three 'registers' of the singing voice. If they are not used for that purpose, they tend to get clogged with mucus, causing headaches and catarrhal troubles. Everyone should take singing lessons, as singing is one of the most health-promoting of all activities.*

So, when you are practising your singing, take advice from the professionals and sing 'from behind the eyes' and this (together with the steam from the bath) should clear your mind and your sinuses!

## APPENDIX

### **Daily Exercises to Improve Sinus and Lymphatic Drainage**

(provided by Norah Wickerson. <http://www.tacklingfibro.co.uk/>)

(these are just some of Norah's suggestions and they are ADDITIONAL to those recommended above)

- Massage the face with the fingertips, all over, giving particular attention to the tender areas – these may be swollen lymph nodes that need help to drain.
- Whilst using a steam inhalation, practice yawning throughout. This helps open all the airwaves right down to the vocal chords. Do not take deep inhalations as this may congest the airwaves more. Norah recommends Olbas oil if desired.
- If you are able, march on the spot for 30 seconds, whilst swinging the arms – when lifting the right leg, swing the left arm forward and vice versa. This helps to activate the thoracic duct pump (in the chest) and thus improve lymphatic drainage. Generally, when out walking, try to swing the arms energetically.
- General shoulder exercises are helpful – shrugging the shoulders, making circles with the shoulders, etc.
- Skin brushing, both wet and dry, all over the body except the face, is good for lymphatic drainage. Use a natural bristle brush or exfoliating sponge. Always stroke from the wrists towards the armpits, from the feet towards the knees and groin, on the torso towards centre chest, and on the neck, upwards towards the chin and base of the skull.