

Acute sinusitis in adults

SELF CARE FORUM FACT SHEET NO. 13

This fact sheet helps you to know what's 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you develop painful irritation and swelling of the bony spaces (sinuses) in the front of your head (sinusitis). Sinusitis is usually caused by an infection, often combined with a cold. This fact sheet also tells you when to become concerned and seek advice from a health professional.

Useful facts

What are sinuses? Sinuses are the cavities in your face bones that open up into the nose. They help control the water content and temperature of the air reaching your lungs.

What is sinusitis? Sinusitis is a swelling and irritation of the lining of the sinuses brought on by the body's response to irritants or bugs (inflammation). Viral infections, such as the common cold, can cause the lining of the nose to swell and block the small opening from the sinuses to the nose. Fluid inside the sinuses may build up, making you feel bunged up and stuffy.

What types are there? Sinusitis can be acute (resolving within 2 or 3 weeks) or chronic (lasting more than 12 weeks).

What are the symptoms? The most common symptoms include:

- a blocked or runny nose
- pain and tenderness around your cheeks, eyes, or forehead
- a reduced sense of smell
- Green or yellow mucus from your nose
- a raised body temperature.

Additional symptoms: headache, cough, a feeling of pressure in your ears, toothache, feeling generally unwell, bad breath, tiredness, and reduced taste and smell. You may also snore at night and sound like you're talking through your nose.

What can I expect to happen?

Duration:

The symptoms of acute sinusitis last longer than the common cold and improve within 2 or 3 weeks. Although, chronic sinusitis may last for months.

Need for treatment:

In most people, sinusitis will get better without treatment, and most people with sinusitis won't need to see their GP.

Will I need antibiotics?

Antibiotics are unlikely to help unless the symptoms are severe or don't go away within 2 to 3 weeks.

Treatment

Over the counter medicines: Paracetamol, ibuprofen or aspirin can help reduce the symptoms of sinusitis. Avoid giving aspirin to children under the age of 16 and follow the manufacturer's instructions. A decongestant preparation for your nose (for a maximum of 1 week) can help if a blocked nose is the problem.

Not recommended: Complementary and alternative medicines, steam inhalation, and drugs such as antihistamines, mucolytics and steroids are currently not recommended.

Speak to a member of your pharmacy team for advice.

What can I do to help myself now and in the future?

Simple measures:

Resting, applying warm face packs and washing out the nose with a steady stream of saline solution (available from your pharmacy) may help relieve your symptoms. Ask a member of your pharmacy team for advice.

Fluids and food:

Drink plenty of fluids to replace those lost from sweating and a runny nose. Get some rest until you feel better – we usually know when we are well enough to return to normal activities. Eat healthily, including at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day.

When to seek help

Contact your GP surgery for urgent advice if you notice one or more of the following:

- If you develop a high temperature (above 39°C or 102.2°F), which can be a sign of a more serious type of infection
- You are confused or disorientated;
- You feel really unwell;
- You are at high risk of complications because you have other medical conditions;
- You have severe pain or discomfort, or a swelling in your face;
- Your nose produces lots of thick green or yellow fluid.
- Your symptoms don't get better within 2 to 3 weeks,

Where to find out more

A member of your pharmacy team can help with assessing and managing your symptoms.

Or, for more information visit the NHS website in your country or other reputable websites, links are below:

- [NHS Inform, Scotland](#)
- [NHS England](#)
- [NHS NI Direct, Northern Ireland](#)
- [NHS111, Wales](#)