

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 inflammation of the sinuses - the air-filled spaces in the bones of your eyes, nose, cheeks and forehead (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). Colds can make your sinuses swell and block the small openings. This traps fluid and makes you feel blocked.

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
- green or yellow mucus from your nose
- a reduced sense of smell or taste
- a raised body temperature
- headache or pressure in your ears
- feeling generally unwell, tired, or run down
- bad breath or toothache
- snoring or nasal-sounding voice

Loss of smell or taste can also be a symptoms of COVID-19, if you are unsure use an LFT test or check NHS guidance.

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. Nasal steroids may sometimes be recommended by GPs, especially if symptoms last longer than 10 days.

Will I need antibiotics?

Most people do not need antibiotics. They do not speed up recovery for most sinus infections. However, you may be offered antibiotics if your symptoms last more than 10 days without improving, or you are very unwell.

Treatment

Over the counter medicines: Paracetamol or ibuprofen can help reduce pain and fever. Aspirin can also be used by adults, but ibuprofen is generally preferred – avoid giving aspirin to anyone under 16. 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, and drugs such as antihistamines and mucolytics are currently not recommended. There is little evidence that steam inhalation helps – and there is a real risk of scalding, particularly in children.

Saline irrigation: Rinsing your nose with a saline (salt water) solution is one of the most effective self-care measures and can be used alongside other treatments. Saline sprays and rinse kits are available from your pharmacy.

Speak to a member of your pharmacy team for advice.



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

Rest, fluids and food:

Drink plenty of fluids to replace those lost from sweating and a runny nose. Return to normal activities when you feel well enough – most people are back to themselves within 2 to 3 weeks. Try to eat regular, healthy meals (including at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day) even if your appetite is reduced – your body needs energy to fight infection.

When to seek help

Call 999 or go to A&E immediately if you have:

- Swelling or redness around one or both eyes, or any change in vision or eye movement
- A severe headache with neck stiffness, sensitivity to light, or a rash
- Sudden confusion or difficulty staying awake
- Symptoms that are severe and make you feel really unwell, or that are rapidly getting much worse

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 (102.2°F)
- An underlying condition such as diabetes or a weakened immune system that makes you more vulnerable to complications
- You have severe pain or pressure in your face;
- Symptoms lasting more than three weeks
- Thick green or yellow fluid from your nose that is not improving

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](#)

