



## Patient education: Sinusitis in adults (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

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### What is sinusitis?

Sinusitis is a condition that can cause a stuffy nose, pain in the face, and discharge (mucus) from the nose. The sinuses are hollow areas in the bones of the face ( [figure 1](#)). They have a thin lining that normally makes a small amount of mucus. When this lining gets irritated or infected, it swells and makes extra mucus. This causes symptoms.

Sinusitis can occur when a person gets sick with a cold. The germs causing the cold can also infect the sinuses. Many times, a person feels like their cold is getting better. But then they get sinusitis and begin to feel sick again.

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### What are the symptoms of sinusitis?

Common symptoms of sinusitis include:

- Stuffy or blocked nose
- Thick white, yellow, or green discharge from the nose
- Pain in the teeth
- Pain or pressure in the face – This often feels worse when a person bends forward.

People with sinusitis can also have other symptoms that include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Trouble smelling
- Ear pressure or fullness
- Headache
- Bad breath
- Feeling tired

Most of the time, symptoms start to improve in 7 to 10 days.

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## Should I see a doctor or nurse?

See your doctor or nurse if your symptoms last more than 10 days, or if your symptoms first get better but then get worse.

Rarely, sinusitis can lead to serious problems. See your doctor or nurse right away (do not wait 10 days) if you have:

- Fever higher than 102°F (38.9°C)
  - Sudden and severe pain in the face and head
  - Trouble seeing or seeing double
  - Trouble thinking clearly
  - Swelling or redness around one or both eyes
  - A stiff neck
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## Is there anything I can do on my own to feel better?

Yes. To reduce your symptoms, you can:

- Take an over-the-counter pain reliever to reduce the pain
- Rinse your nose and sinuses with salt water a few times a day – Ask your doctor or nurse about the best way to do this.

Your doctor might also prescribe a steroid nose spray to reduce the swelling in your nose. (These kinds of steroid nose sprays are safe to take, and do not contain the same steroids that some athletes take illegally.)

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## How is sinusitis treated?

Most of the time, sinusitis does not need to be treated with antibiotic medicines. This is because most sinusitis is caused by viruses, not bacteria, and antibiotics do not kill viruses. In fact, even sinusitis caused by bacteria will usually get better on its own without antibiotics.

Some people with sinusitis do need treatment with antibiotics. If your symptoms have not improved after 10 days, ask your doctor if you should take antibiotics. Your doctor might

recommend that you wait 1 more week to see if your symptoms improve. But if you have symptoms such as a fever or a lot of pain, they might prescribe antibiotics. It is important to follow your doctor's instructions about taking your antibiotics.

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## What if my symptoms do not get better?

If your symptoms do not get better, talk with your doctor or nurse. They might order tests to figure out why you still have symptoms. These can include:

- CT scan or other imaging tests – Imaging tests create pictures of the inside of the body.
- A test to look inside the sinuses – For this test, a doctor puts a thin tube with a camera on the end into the nose and up into the sinuses.

Some people get a lot of sinus infections or have symptoms that last at least 3 months. These people can have a different type of sinusitis called "chronic sinusitis." Chronic sinusitis can be caused by different things. For example, some people have growths inside their nose or sinuses that are called "polyps." Other people have allergies that cause their symptoms.

Chronic sinusitis can be treated in different ways. If you have chronic sinusitis, talk with your doctor about which treatments are right for you.

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## More on this topic

[Patient education: Rinsing out your nose with salt water \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Chronic sinusitis \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Acute sinusitis \(sinus infection\) \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Chronic rhinosinusitis \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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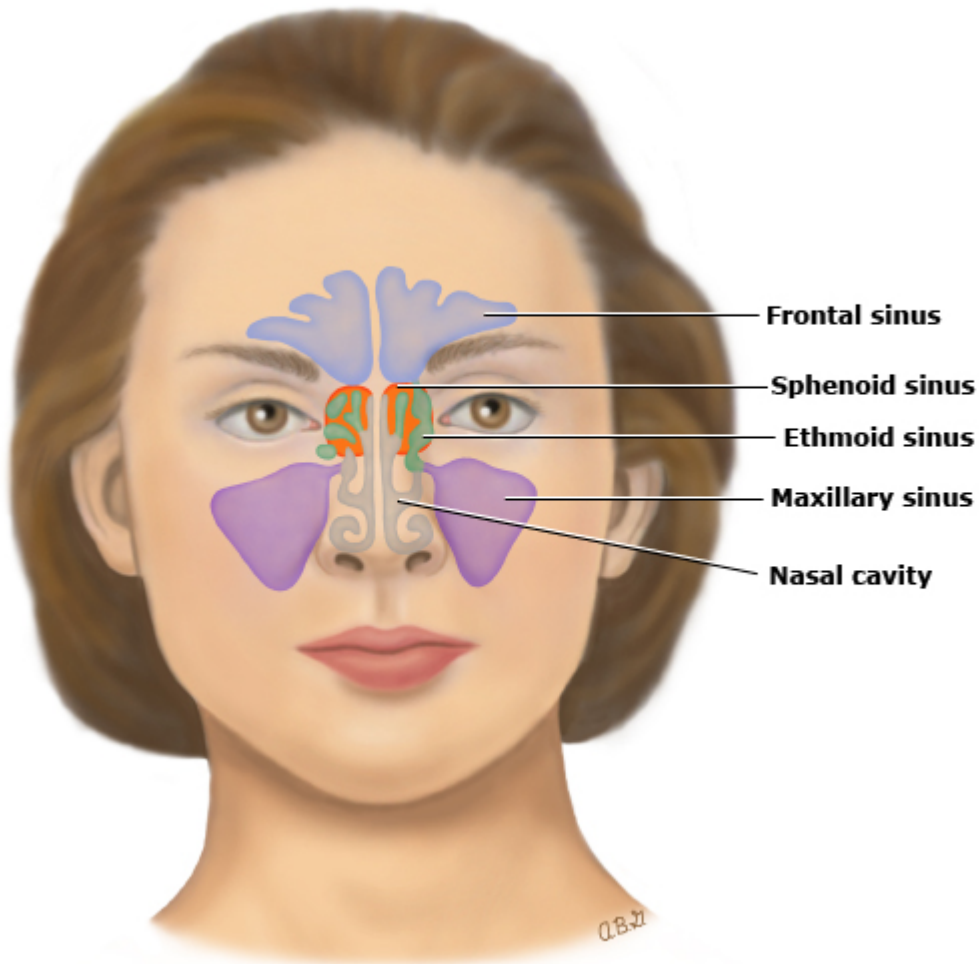
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## Topic 15535 Version 16.0

## GRAPHICS

### Sinuses of the face

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This drawing shows the sinuses of the face.

Graphic 75045 Version 7.0

