

# Stop the Sinus

There's a lot you can do to save yourself from having to suffer through those stuffy sinuses

**S**inus problems are a common complaint. According to Dr Kevin Soh, an ear, nose and throat specialist at the National University Hospital, "Sinusitis is very common. At least 30 per cent of Singaporeans have had it at one time or another."

Women are especially vulnerable. The estrogen hormone in your body (which goes sky high during pregnancy and when taking hormone replacement therapy) can cause swelling in your nose. This blocks sinus drainage and sets you up for infections. Luckily, with a little know-how, sinus problems are surprisingly easy to prevent – and cure.

## What Causes the Problem

When symptoms are serious and come after a cold or flu, chances are you have acute sinusitis. Your nose gets stuffed up and sinuses get blocked because the fluid can't drain away. Says Dr Soh, "Bacteria or a virus weakens the nose tissues, which causes the infection."

Symptoms that last more than three months or occur at least thrice a year, indicate that you may have chronic sinusitis. This is not just an infection

but an inflammation or swelling of the sinuses.

Structural problems – such as polyps (non-cancerous growths) or injured nose bones – can block sinus drainage and trigger swelling. Allergies, fumes and cigarette smoke also increase your risk of sinusitis.

If you suspect any of these, ask your GP for a diagnosis. Your doctor might also recommend a mini CT scan, a high-tech X-ray that pinpoints the exact cause of your sinusitis.

## Home Treatment

In many cases, sinusitis that starts after a cold or flu clears up within two weeks – even without antibiotics. But to speed up your recovery, try these proven home remedies:

- **Beat the bug with echinacea and goldenseal.** Over 500 international studies show that echinacea is a powerful anti-viral agent. "Goldenseal is a natural antibiotic, so the two will treat any sinus infection well," says naturopathic physician Mark Stengler, author of *The Natural Physician – Your Health Guide for Common Ailments*.

## Anatomy of sinusitis

Where the pain is most likely to strike

- 1) **FRONTAL SINUSITIS** gives a headache over the forehead.
- 2) **ETHMOID SINUSITIS** gives a headache, and pain behind and between the eyes.
- 3) **SPHENOID SINUSITIS** pain may be felt in the front or back of the head.
- 4) **MAXILLARY SINUSITIS** gives pain in cheeks, below the eyes and a toothache.



Illustration: Cheryl Chan



Beat that stuffy sinus now – with proven home cures.

## It's Time to See a Doctor When...

- Over-the-counter medicine or these home remedies are of no help
- You develop a high fever or your eyes swell up

Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics, decongestants, mucus-thinning drugs or steroid nasal sprays which shrink nasal polyps and don't cause rebound congestion. If symptoms continue, you may need a nasal washout. Warm saline is flushed through the cheek sinuses to wash out pus. Surgery is another solution. Says NUH's Dr Soh, "This is to unblock sinus openings to help drainage. Sometimes, we also re-set nasal tissues to reduce the chance of sinusitis coming back."

## Signs of Trouble

A cold that lasts more than 10 days is likely to be sinusitis. Other warning signs are:

- Aching teeth
- Dripping nose
- Sore throat
- Thick, coloured mucus
- Face pain (especially when bending over)
- Headaches
- Loss of sense of smell or taste
- Bad breath
- Pain when chewing
- Persistent cough
- Fatigue
- Swollen cheeks
- Fever
- Frequent asthma attacks

Take two capsules every two or three hours for the first few days, then taper off over the week. If you're pregnant or allergic to ragweed, avoid goldenseal, but echinacea is safe.

- **Soothe irritated mucous membranes with steam.** Heat a pot of water to almost boiling. Remove from heat. Drape a towel over your head, lean over the pot and inhale the steam for at least five minutes. Do this twice daily until symptoms have cleared. To speed up healing, add four drops of rosemary or eucalyptus oil to the water after taking it off the stove.

- **Keep nasal passages open.** Studies have proven that hot chicken soup does open and drain the sinus cavities. If it's black chicken soup, even better.

- **Treat a sore throat with lozenges.** You get a sore throat because pus from your nose leaks into your throat. Breathing through your mouth also irritates it. Over-the-counter lozenges can soothe it.

- **Rinse your sinuses with saline.** "Salt water restores the chemical balance to the mucous membranes," says Dr Stankiewicz. Mix one cup of warm water with 1/2 teaspoon of salt and a pinch of baking soda. Use a spray bottle to squirt the solution into your nostrils. Repeat three or four times a day until infection has cleared.

- **Limit decongestant nasal spray use.** Don't use this for more than 10 days. Says Dr Soh, "It becomes less effective each time you use it. Your symptoms could become worse." Still, steroid nasal



Wonder soup... A bowl of hot chicken soup helps keep nasal passages open.

sprays (used for allergies) are safe for long-term use and help to prevent sinusitis from returning.

## Prevent a Relapse

No matter what sort of sinusitis you have, consider these tried-and-true measures:

- **Get tested for allergies.** Allergies can cause a swelling of mucous membranes. Some triggers: Dairy goods, wheat and eggs. Avoid suspect foods for at least two weeks, then add them back to your diet (one type of food every three to four days) to see which you're allergic to. Or do a skin test at your doctor's.

- **Keep your home dust-free.** Here in Singapore, our biggest enemy lies in the faeces of house dust mites. They live in bed linen, towels, curtains, carpets, even animals and stuffed toys. Get a blood test to check for allergies.

- **Think twice about antibiotics.** The more you take, the greater your resistance to antibiotics. 30 per cent of the bacteria that cause sinusitis are resistant to antibiotics. "Your best defense is to use home treatments as your first line of attack," says Dr Stengler.

By Brenda Kearns and Penelope Chan

## Sinus Talk

Professor James Smith from NUH will give a talk titled *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Understanding the Difference Between Flu, Common Cold and Nose Allergy*. **When:** August 15, 3.30 to 4.30 pm. **Where:** Bukit Merah Community Library Lecture Hall. **Fee:** Free. To book a place, call 375 5111.