

My head is stuffy

Doctor word: Acute sinusitis

What causes this stuffiness? A sinus infection could be the cause of head stuffiness. Sinuses are small compartment behind the cheeks, nose and forehead that can become filled with mucus during an infection. Mucus is formed to attempt to wash out the virus or bacteria causing the infection. When the mucus becomes blocked, you get a stuffy feeling or dull headache known as sinusitis.

What causes sinusitis? Many things. These include cold viruses (most common), bacteria, smoking, allergies, swimming, using nasal sprays frequently and changes in air pressure. Acute bacterial sinusitis occurs when bacteria grow in the blocked mucus and can be treated with antibiotics prescribed by your doctor. Colored mucus (even green) is normal in all sinus infections—not just bacterial infections.

Do antibiotics work for all causes of sinusitis? NO. Only bacterial sinusitis can be treated with antibiotics. Viruses are neither killed nor cured faster with antibiotics. Your health care provider can talk with you about how effective antibiotics would be in your situation. Always finish all antibiotics and never save them. If not, you could be promoting stronger germs.

Most sinus infections are caused by cold viruses and can NOT be treated with antibiotics!!

How can I feel better? Drink plenty of fluids. Breathe in moist air such as in a hot shower, hot bath, or using a humidifier. Take acetaminophen or ibuprofen for sinus headaches. Use a decongestant for 2-3 days.

Should I see a doctor? If you don't see improvement after 10-14 days, you may want to visit your healthcare provider. See a doctor sooner if you start developing fevers over 101°F, painful swelling around the eyes, or have a lot of facial pain when leaning forward.

How do I prevent sinusitis? Wash your hands to prevent the spread of viruses. Stop smoking. Only use nasal sprays for the time advised by your doctor. Ask your doctor about allergy medications. Eat healthy, exercise regularly and get plenty of sleep.



Infectious Disease Epidemiology

Adapted from Washington State Department of Health,
Louisiana Office of Public Health, and the CDC