

Sinusitis and Asthma

For lots of people, sinusitis and asthma go together. According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, as many as half of all people with moderate to severe asthma also have chronic sinusitis.

Along with all the problems caused by asthma, having sinusitis -- or sinus infections -- can be tough to handle. It can make you feel sick and miserable. Without good treatment, it can last for months or even years. What's worse, one condition can worsen the other. Sinusitis has been associated with more severe cases of asthma. So not only does having asthma increase the odds of getting a sinus infection, but a sinus infection can make your asthma harder to control. But there's good news. There are lots of treatments available for both sinus infections and asthma. And studies show that treating one condition often helps relieve the symptoms of the other. The key is to treat both conditions aggressively. What is sinusitis? While there are many sinuses in your body, the term is often used to refer to the paranasal sinuses. These are a group of four hollow cavities in your face, near the cheeks and eyes. They're connected to the nasal passageways and help warm up, moisten and filter the air you breathe in. Sinusitis is the swelling or infection of these sinuses. Just like the lining of your nose, the sinuses can become irritated and swollen by allergens, viruses, or bacterial infection. Common triggers of sinusitis include:

- A cold or viral infection
- Air pollution, smog
- Airborne allergens
- Dry or cold air
- Ozone

When the tissue in the sinuses gets irritated, it produces mucus. If enough mucus and trapped air builds up, you feel painful pressure in the sinuses. These are the familiar signs of a sinus headache. Symptoms of sinusitis vary, depending on which sinuses are affected. But some common signs are pain in these areas:

- Forehead
- Upper jaw and teeth
- Area around the eyes
- Neck, ear, and on the top of the head

Severe sinusitis can also cause:

- Thick yellow or green mucus
- Bad-tasting postnasal drip
- Sore throat
- Fever
- Weakness
- Fatigue

Cough Usually, sinus infections are caused by viruses, like a cold virus. But if the sinuses have been blocked for too long, bacteria can invade, causing a secondary infection. Having multiple sinus infections can lead to chronic (long-term) sinusitis. What's the connection between sinusitis and asthma? Many studies have shown a connection between sinus infections and asthma. One 2006 study showed that, when compared with those who only have asthma, people who have both sinusitis and asthma:

- Tend to have more severe asthma symptoms
- May have more severe asthma flares
- Are more likely to have disturbed sleep

The risks of developing sinusitis may not be the same for everyone with asthma. The same 2006 study showed that sinusitis coupled with asthma was more common in women than men. It also may be more common in whites than other racial groups. Acid reflux (GERD) and smoking may increase the risk of someone with asthma developing sinusitis, too. The study also suggested that the more severe a person's asthma is, the more debilitating the sinusitis. In people with severe asthma, sinusitis seems to make the asthma symptoms harder to control. How are sinusitis and asthma treated? Treatment is important in preventing sinusitis from worsening. Again, since the conditions are linked, treating sinusitis may have the added benefit of improving your asthma symptoms. If you have sinusitis and asthma, your doctor might recommend that you use:

- Steroid nasal sprays to reduce the swelling. Easing the inflammation might allow the sinuses to drain normally.
- Decongestant or antihistamine medicines.
- Painkillers -- if necessary -- to reduce discomfort. Always ask your doctor before using nasal spray decongestants. Sometimes, they can wind up leaving you more stuffed up. You might try spraying warm salt water into the nose, or breathing in steam. If a secondary bacterial infection has developed in your sinuses, you'll need antibiotics. Your doctor will probably prescribe them for about 10-14 days. Just remember that antibiotics will only work in cases of bacterial infection. They will not help with viruses. For people with allergies, controlling exposure to allergens is key. Not only will it reduce your asthma symptoms, it will also reduce your risk of sinus infections. Avoid any allergic triggers and irritants, like cigarette smoke. You can also ask your doctor if allergy shots might be helpful. In some cases, more involved treatments are necessary. Physical problems in the nasal passages can lead to chronic sinusitis. These include narrow nasal passages, a deviated septum, or polyps -- small lumps in the nose. Surgically correcting these problems can sometimes resolve the problem. Can postnasal drip trigger asthma? Postnasal drip is an unscientific term that refers to the sensation of thick phlegm in the throat, which can become infected. Your glands in the nose and throat produce mucus continuously (1 to 2 pints per day), that helps to cleanse the nasal membranes, helps warm the air you breathe, and traps inhaled foreign matter. Mucus also helps to fight infection. In normal situations, the throat is moistened by the secretions from the nasal and throat mucous glands. This is part of the mucous-nasal cilia system that defends us from disease. When the amount of liquid secreted by the nose and sinus is reduced and the cilia of the nose and sinus slow down, the fluid thickens and you become very aware of its presence. Because the thick phlegm is unpleasant and often

infected, our bodies naturally try to get rid of it by noisily coughing and clearing our throats. Sometimes postnasal drip syndrome is associated with asthma as the thick mucus secretions drain from the back of the nose to the back of the throat, causing throat clearing, cough, and bronchial constriction. How is sinobronchial syndrome related to asthma? Sinobronchial syndrome is a combination of sinusitis and the resulting lower respiratory tract symptoms such as bronchitis or asthma. With sinobronchial syndrome, the sinus disease may be caused by allergies or an infection -- or it can be chronic. The lung disease can be one of several types such as acute infective bronchitis, recurrent bouts of bronchitis, chronic bronchitis, or asthma that's difficult to manage. It's thought that the sinus disease resulting in lower airway symptoms such as asthma is due to a constant drip of inflammatory and infective secretions from the back of the nose to the back of the throat. This throat irritation may cause bronchial constriction by a reflex transmitted by the nervous system. Or, the postnasal drip of inflammatory secretions from the upper airway may create a secondary inflammatory reaction of the lungs, causing either asthma or bronchitis. What are the symptoms of sinobronchial syndrome? With sinobronchial syndrome, you will feel a host of miserable nasal and chest symptoms including shortness of breath, wheezing, a productive cough, nasal obstruction, fever, headache, or chest tightness. Along with signs of sinus inflammation or infection with pain and tenderness over the sinuses, you might have constant nasal and sinus drainage, wheezing, cough, and other respiratory or asthma symptoms. How can you prevent sinusitis? There's no sure-fire way of preventing sinusitis. But there are some things you can do to lower your risk: Use regular steroid sprays to prevent further sinus infections. This is particularly important if you've had recurrent or chronic sinusitis.

- Avoid allergens and irritants, if you have allergies.
- Take your asthma medication as recommended. Keeping your asthma symptoms under control can reduce your risks of developing serious sinusitis.