

# CLEAR YOUR HEAD

At best, it's a stuffy nose. At its worst, it can lead you to the surgeon. For most sinusitis patients, life lies in the middle

BY BENITA SEN

The sinuses are, philosophically speaking, nothing. But tell that to a person suffering from sinusitis, and you may have to run for your life.

The sinuses are not little glands like the thyroid, nor are they tubes like the blood vessels. They are cavities whose membrane linings may get infected and inflamed.

Although most sufferers hold their foreheads in pain when they say they have a sinus problem, there are sinuses or cavities in other parts of the body also. The major sinuses in parts of the body other than the face include the dural venous sinuses in the brain and the anal sinuses in the rectum.

However, since the paranasal or in-the-head sinuses tend to be the most commonly inflamed, sinusitis refers to an infection in any, several, or all of four pairs of sinuses that are linked to the nasal cavities: sphenoid (behind the eyes), ethmoid (between the eyes), frontal (forehead) and maxillary (behind cheek bones).

## Why do you need them?

When you suffer from an inflamed sinus, the pain may make you wonder what sinuses are there for. They are the head's helmets and "shock absorbers" and filter our breath. They keep the head lighter than it would have otherwise been and insulate the skull. Without them, your voice would sound rather different since they offer room for the voice to resonate.

Inflammation increases the pressure inside the paranasal sinus. That is why someone suffering from sinusitis feels heavy-headed and may suffer throbbing pain around the nose, upper cheeks, eyes and temples. Some feel the blinding pain in multiple parts of the head simultaneously.

Not every cold results in a sinus-induced headache, but you know you have sinusitis when the headaches are constant and generally in the region of the sinuses or at the nape of the neck.

## How did the bug slip in?

Whether the attack is chronic (often recurring) or acute (sudden), a cold is the surest way to infected sinuses. "Any cold has the ability to cause sinusitis if not handled properly," says Atul Ahuja, a senior consultant ENT surgeon at Nova Specialty Surgery and Max Super Speciality Hospital, both in New Delhi. So, apart from the discomfort of cold and a sore throat, a sinusitis victim often has a blocked nose.

The chronic version is the most common. Says Delhi-based banker Karan Chowdhury, 51: "My first sinus attack happened when I was in my teens. Since then, virtually every cold I catch leads to inflamed sinuses although the severity differs depending on how careful I have

been" (see "Live Smart").

Sinusitis can be caused by bacteria like *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Haemophilus influenzae*, by viruses and even by fungi. Sometimes, a malformed sinus cavity or an accident that injured the nasal cavity can stop the mucus from draining out the sinus cavities. Even polyps or a deviated nasal septum or nasal bone can cause the sinuses to block.

As the mucus collects, bacteria attack it and the infection spreads. So, what you believe is a cold could be just mucus that has collected because it can't find a way to drain out because the sinuses are blocked. Germs collect in the trapped mucus and cause the infection or inflammation.

Although sinusitis is troublesome when it shows up with a headache, it is not just a pain. Untreated, the infection can travel down and affect the lungs. It can become a chronic problem if fungal or bacterial infections linger in the sinus cavities.

In fact, even allergies can give one sinusitis. Says Gurgaon resident Rajni Singh, 44, "I shifted to a green locality a few years ago and started getting hay fever around spring." She suffers from headaches, a blocked nose, fever and a cough. "I keep plenty of tissues at hand because you need to clean the nose," she cautions.

When she suffered the typical pain associated with sinusitis, the doctor diagnosed it as a chronic case. "In sinusitis, the symptoms are prolonged. There may be headache or facial pain over the forehead, between the eyes or in the cheeks," says Anant Kishore, senior consultant ENT surgeon, Indraprastha Apollo Hospital, New Delhi, and director of the Adventis ENT Centre, Gurgaon.

So any cold, whether allergic or from a virus or bacteria, can lead to inflamed sinuses. Don't get alarmed if the discharge is yellow or even green, but report it to a doctor.

## All in the head

Delhi-based schoolteacher Anindita Sinha, 49, has had a string of health problems from chronic tonsillitis to arthritis. But the one she dreads the most is sinusitis. "My head hurts so much that I hold it upright even if I have to lift something off the floor," she recalls. Even the slightest movement registers inside like a hammering. At the peak of the infection, she has to take a couple of days off from work since any movement, even during commuting, can bring on sharp jabs inside her head.

Sinusitis can hit anyone. While we don't have exact data on India, in 2009 there were about 29.3 million adults suffering from sinusitis in the US, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention there. Yet, sinus infections can be controlled—at least for a few months or till the next cold—with proper treatment.

The two-pronged fight against sinusitis

includes reducing the inflammation and fighting the infection. As the nasal discharge thins out, the sinuses open and clear. If the symptoms persist in spite of prolonged medical treatment, points out Dr Kishore, the doctor may recommend surgery.

Dr Ahuja recalls being contacted by an obstetrician regarding a 25-year-old woman who was eight months pregnant. She was suffering from excruciating headaches and blurred vision. Heavy antibiotics and painkillers did not help. An MRI scan showed reason for surgical intervention. "The response (to the operation) was so dramatic that the patient did not need any painkillers even on the day following the surgery," says Shalabh Sharma, senior consultant, ENT department, Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, New Delhi. "Some cases whose investigations like nasal endoscopy and CT scan show irreversible disease need surgery for a cure."

One option is the Functional Endoscopic Sinus Surgery called the traditional or "gold standard", where minuscule laparoscopes are sent through the nostrils to open the sinuses. The patient can be back to routine life—except swimming—in two weeks. The alternative is the minimally invasive procedure called Balloon Sinuplasty, which widens the opening of the sinus with a balloon catheter. Within days, life should be normal. Fees for the surgery can cost upwards of ₹50,000 while sinuplasty can be more than three times as much.

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## LIVE SMART

Tired of that throbbing pain and the blocked nose? Here are some ways of reducing the severity of sinusitis attacks

► Sinusitis has triggered unusual studies. Researchers in Sweden believe humming may reduce sinus attacks since it "increases nasal nitric oxide", which is a dilator and builds up immunity. When you hum, you exhale stronger and longer.

► Try keeping to a hot or warm shower through the year. A cold shower can cause the nasal passage and blood vessels to tighten.

► Inhale steam if the nostrils are blocked.

► Treat a cold as early as you can. For anyone with a history of sinusitis, here's a word of caution from Pradip Uppal, director, Dr Uppal ENT Hospital, Thane, Maharashtra: "Anti-cold treatment can lead to drying of mucus, which can further block sinuses." So, avoid playing your own dox and get off over-the-counter medication.

► Avoid allergens like pollution or flowers, even dust and vehicular pollution.

► Since sinusitis is often related to lifestyle, Dr Uppal believes many cases can be avoided with a slight modification in

