

Choosing Wisely[®]

An initiative of the ABIM Foundation

ConsumerReportsHealth



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF
FAMILY PHYSICIANS



Treating sinus problems

Don't rush to antibiotics

The sinuses are small, hollow spaces inside the head. They drain into the nose. The sinuses often cause problems after a cold. They can also cause problems if they get blocked up from hay fever and other allergies. The medical name for sinus problems is sinusitis.

Sinus problems can be very uncomfortable. You may feel stuffed up. You may have yellow, green, or gray mucus. And you may feel pain or pressure around your eyes, cheeks, forehead, or teeth.

Each year, millions of people use antibiotic drugs to treat sinus problems. However, they usually do not need antibiotics. Here's why:

Antibiotics usually do not help sinus problems.

- Antibiotics kill bacteria. They do not kill viruses or help allergies. Viruses or allergies cause most sinus problems.
- Sinus problems usually get better in a week or so without drugs, even when bacteria cause them.

Antibiotics cost money.

Most antibiotics do not cost very much. But why waste your money? Patients often ask for antibiotics, and doctors often give them. As a result, Americans spend an extra \$31 million a year on health care costs.



Antibiotics have risks.

- About one out of every four people who take antibiotics has side effects, such as dizziness, stomach problems, and rashes.
- In rare cases, people have severe allergic reactions to antibiotics.
- Overuse of antibiotics has become a serious problem. When you use them too much, they stop working as well. Then, when you do need them, they may not help as much.

When should you use antibiotics?

You usually need an antibiotic when you have an infection that is caused by bacteria, and the infection is not going away on its own. This may be the case when:

- Your symptoms last longer than a week.
- Your symptoms start to get better, but then get worse again.
- Your symptoms are very severe. You should get immediate treatment if:
 - You have severe pain and tenderness in the area around your nose and eyes.
 - You have signs of a skin infection—such as a hot, red rash that spreads quickly.
 - You have a fever over 102° F.

When you need an antibiotic, which one should you use?

When you need an antibiotic, ask your doctor if you can use generic amoxicillin. It is usually the best choice. It costs about \$4 for a prescription. It works just as well as brand-name antibiotics, such as Augmentin, that cost much more.

What about a CT scan?

A CT scan is a series of X-rays. It gives your doctor a picture of your sinuses.

Some doctors recommend a CT scan when you have a sinus problem. But usually you do not need a CT scan. Generally, you only need a CT scan if you have sinus problems often, or if you are thinking about having sinus surgery.

This report is for you to use when talking with your health-care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

© 2012 Consumer Reports. Developed in cooperation with the American Academy of Family Physicians. To learn more about the sources used in this report and terms and conditions of use, visit

ConsumerHealthChoices.org/about-us/.

Advice from Consumer Reports

How should you treat sinus problems?

Most people get over a sinus infection in about a week. These tips may help you feel better sooner:

Rest. Your body needs rest to fight the infection. Try to rest as much as you can, especially in the first few days.

Drink warm liquids. Drinking warm water, tea, and other liquids helps thin and loosen mucus. This helps it drain away faster.

Breathe warm, moist air. The steam from a warm shower or bath, or from a kettle of boiling water helps to loosen mucus and soothe your throat.



Keep your head up on a pillow when you lie down. This helps keep postnasal drip from going into the back of your throat

Gargle to soothe your throat. Use half a teaspoon of salt stirred into a glass of warm water.

Rinse your nose. Saltwater sprays or nasal irrigation kits may make you feel better. Make sure you follow the directions.

Be careful with over-the-counter remedies. Some nasal drops or sprays contain oxymetazoline (Afrin, Neosynephrine Nighttime, and generic store brands). These may help for a few days. But they can make you more stuffed up if you use them longer than three days.

- If you still feel stuffed up after three days, try generic pseudoephedrine pills. They cost less than the brand-name (Sudafed) but work just as well. You need to ask the pharmacist for them because they are kept behind the counter. But check with your doctor first, since they can cause serious side effects.
- Avoid allergy medicines (antihistamines, like Benadryl or Claritin). They do not relieve cold symptoms very much. And they can cause unpleasant side effects, such as dizziness, dry mouth, headache, and sleepiness.