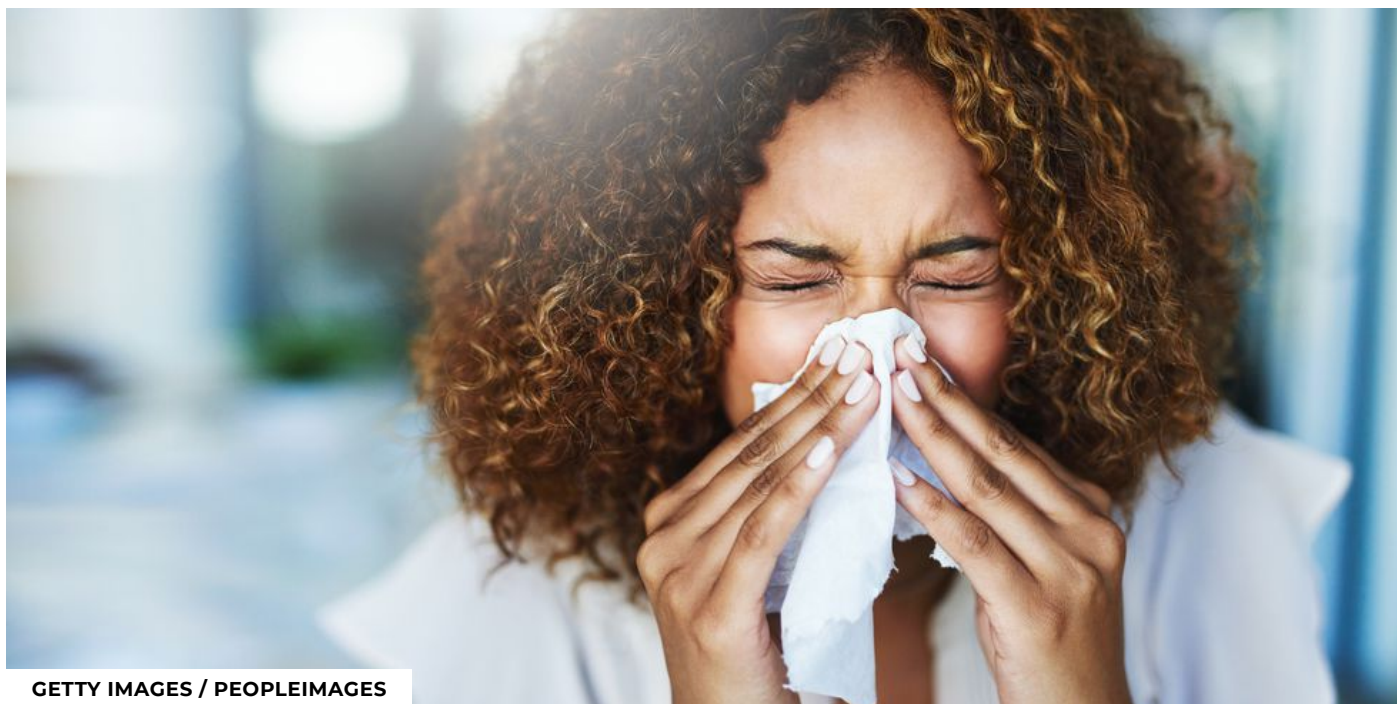


6 Signs Your Awful Cold Has Actually Turned Into a Sinus Infection

Sinus infections are hard to diagnose because they mimic a cold.

By [Katherine Martinelli](#) Jan 16, 2019



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Congestion. Runny nose. [Sore throat](#). These are [cold symptoms](#) we know all too well. But what happens when all the chicken soup and [vitamin C](#) in the world don't seem to be doing the trick? It may be one of the sneaky signs that you actually have a sinus infection.

What is a sinus infection?

"Sinus infections are viral or bacterial infections of the sinus cavities located in the cheeks, between the eyes, above the eyebrows, and behind the eyes," explains [Melynda Barnes](#), MD, associate clinical director of [Ro](#) and former assistant professor of surgery-otolaryngology at Yale School of Medicine.

"During a sinus infection, the lining of the sinuses becomes inflamed and swollen, and the glands within the lining produces a lot of mucus. It is this sinus inflammation and mucus that leads to the common but sneaky symptoms," Dr. Barnes says.

There are four sinuses on each side of your face, and any one of them can become infected, says Dr. Barnes. Which sinus is infected will determine the symptoms you may experience. If your cheek sinuses are infected, for example, then you will likely feel pain over your cheeks.

Are sinus infections contagious?

Sort of. If your sinus infection was brought on by a virus, then you can spread the virus to others. However, you can't spread the sinus infection itself. The inflammation that builds up from a cold is what causes a sinus infection, but this doesn't necessarily happen every time someone catches a cold.

Family nurse practitioner [Valerie King](#), a clinical assistant professor and coordinator of the nurse practitioner program at UMass Lowell, explains, "Most sinus infections are caused by viruses. And yes, viruses can be contagious because they can be present on many items that people touch. But usually if you get sick with a virus that you've touched, you only develop cold-like symptoms. It's when the cold like symptoms, such as congestion, lingers and can actually develop into a bacterial infection."

How are sinus infections diagnosed?

Determining whether someone has a sinus infection can be difficult even for a trained professional. "Since sinus infections and [bronchitis symptoms](#) aren't easily diagnosed with a simple test and rely on the clinician's judgment of the clinical picture, it is a tricky and confusing illness," says King.

Signs you have a sinus infection

Often, sinus infections occur after a cold, so they may take you by surprise—especially since they have many of the same symptoms as respiratory infections and are often caused by the same viruses that cause colds. If your symptoms persists for more than a week, it's worth checking in with your doctor to see if you have a sinus infection. Here are some common sinus infection symptoms to look out for.

1

Eye pain



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If you are experiencing eye pain in addition to other cold symptoms, then there's a good chance that you have a sinus infection. "This occurs because the sinuses sit in areas above, below, and next to the eyes," explains [Ming Wang](#), MD, an ophthalmologist based in Nashville, TN. "When pressure builds up in these areas, it can cause a dull pain that feels like it's coming from around or behind the eyes, but it is actually coming from the sinuses," he says. Dr. Wang says this is one of the most misunderstood symptoms of sinus infections he sees.

2

Nighttime coughing



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There's nothing worse than being kept awake at night because you are coughing, and it turns out that it could be a sign that your cold is actually a sinus infection. "Lying down at night makes it easier for mucus to drip down the back of the throat (post-nasal drip), irritating the back of the throat and the gag reflex. The body responds instinctively by coughing," says [Chirag Shah](#), MD, co-founder of Accesa Labs and a board-certified emergency medicine physician.

3

Toothache



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Although tooth pain is usually worth a trip to the dentist, it can actually be a sinus infection symptom. “One very common unknown side effect of sinus infections is actually tooth pain in the upper right and left quadrants due to placement and inflammation of the pressure the sinus is placing on the teeth,” says [Libbi Finnessy](#), DDS, founder of Bellevue Dental Health.

4

Headache



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Having a sinus headache doesn't automatically mean you have a sinus infection, but headaches can be one of the sneaky signs that one is brewing. "Traditional sinus headaches tend to be 'frontal,' or felt in the forehead and eyebrows, and 'maxillary,' or in the cheeks," explains Amber Stephens, MD, a family physician at DaVita Medical Group.

"Often when a patient leans down or bends forward, such as when tying one's shoe, the motion will cause mucus to pour forward with increased pressure." Dr. Stephens says she has had patients who thought they had migraines but actually had sinus infections.

5

Bad breath



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Dr. Barnes says that a foul smell in your nose or bad breath can also be signs that a sinus infection is at play. As Don Grant, MBChB, a UK-based physician at The Independent Pharmacy explains it, "If you have a sinus infection, you may experience a thick, yellow or green mucus in the nose and throat. As the mucus drips down your throat, it affects your breath, making it smell unpleasant." And because your nose is congested, you'll breathe through your mouth more, drying it out and exacerbating your bad breath.

6

Symptoms are worsening



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Are your symptoms worsening rather than improving after a week or so? If you suspect a sinus infection, pay attention to the timing.

“Colds are usually over by five to seven days, whereas sinus infections can worsen at five to seven days, especially if they are bacterial and you haven’t started antibiotics yet,” says Dr. Barnes. So if you just can’t seem to kick that cold, it’s probably worth checking in with your doctor.

7

How to get rid of a sinus infection



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The treatment for a sinus infection depends on whether it is viral or bacterial. If it is viral, antibiotics won’t help, so Dr. Wang suggests remedies like nasal saline sprays or rinses (like [neti pots](#)—be sure to use distilled water), nasal steroids (such as Flonase), decongestants, and over-the-counter pain relievers. Dr. King notes that most sinus infections are viral.

Bacterial sinus infections, however, require antibiotics—and sometimes more. “For some patients, the swelling inside the nose can be so severe that in addition to antibiotics, they will also need a prescription for low-dose oral steroids,” says Dr. Barnes.

If you have recurring sinus infections that persist for multiple weeks, Dr. Barnes says your doctor may refer you to an otolaryngologist (ear-nose-throat surgeon) to discuss sinus surgery for treating recurrent infections.

[KATHERINE MARTINELLI](#)

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