

Sinusitis, Common Colds or Allergies?

The following chart compares and contrasts sinusitis, colds and allergies:

	Symptoms	Onset	Typical Duration
Sinusitis	Congestion Green or gray nasal discharge Post nasal drip Pressure in the face Headache Cough	Develops as a complication after a cold Can also be triggered by allergies	Can last weeks, months, or possibly years if not treated
Colds	Runny nose with watery to thick yellow discharge Sneezing Weakness and fatigue	Symptoms develop within 1-3 days of exposure to the cold virus	5-7 days
Allergies	Congestion Runny nose with thin, watery discharge Sneezing Wheezing Itchy nose, throat and eyes	Symptoms begin almost immediately after exposure to specific allergens(s) If seasonal allergies, symptoms occur at the same time every year If perennial allergies, symptoms are present year round	Symptoms last as long as you are exposed to the allergen If that allergen is present year round, symptoms may be chronic

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How to tell the difference

If you ever had continuous “cold” symptoms or chronic allergies, there is a strong possibility you may also have had sinusitis. Over 35 million Americans suffer from sinusitis each year. Since symptoms may mimic a cold or allergies, many sinus sufferers never get a proper diagnosis and the treatment they need.

Sinusitis

Specifically, sinusitis is a term for inflammation and/or infection of the mucous membranes of the sinus cavities. Sinusitis is often caused by infection and/or allergy and its underlying cause may be overlooked. In fact, allergies may increase your chance of developing sinusitis. When sinus infections recur or last longer than 3 months, it is defined as chronic sinusitis.

The sinuses are hollow air spaces located within the skull surrounding and connecting the nasal passageway. There are 4 sets of sinuses located over the eyes and the brow area, behind each cheekbone, in-between the eyes and just behind the bridge and upper region of the nose. Each sinus has an opening into the nose for the free exchange of air and mucus.

Sinusitis Continued

Anything that causes swelling and inflammation of the nasal mucous membranes including allergic reactions, viral and or bacterial nasal infections can similarly affect the sinuses. When swollen membranes prevent air from entering the sinuses, a vacuum can develop causing sinus pain. Air trapped within obstructed sinuses along with thick mucus or pus may also result in pressure on the sinus walls leading to pain. Other symptoms may include a stuffy nose, loss of the sense of smell, post nasal drip with sore throats, hoarseness and/or persistent cough.

Common Cold

If you have a common cold, you usually have a runny nose that is watery that can become thick and yellow. You may experience low-grade (less than 100° F) temperature, sneezing, weakness and fatigue. Symptoms may start abruptly within hours and last 5-10 days, peaking within the first 5 days. If you have allergies, you do not have a fever and typically present with a clear nasal discharge and/or watery eyes. You may experience congestion, itching, and sneezing. Itching can be experienced in the nose, throat and eyes. If you have sinusitis, you usually have more persistent thickened mucus discharge present for more than 10 days.

Studies have shown that viral upper respiratory symptoms that last at least 7-10 days may be complicated by bacterial infections in 60% of affected adults. Because individual symptoms vary, physicians must rely on their clinical judgment to determine when an acute viral infection has been complicated by a bacterial infection. In general, it is assumed that an acute bacterial sinus infection occurs if the upper respiratory symptoms have persisted beyond 10 days. Bacterial sinusitis is usually accompanied by thickened nasal drainage, nasal congestion, facial pressure (especially one-sided or focused in one particular sinus area), post nasal drip, decreased sense of smell, fever, cough, fatigue, dental pain and/or ear pressure.

In the early stages of a common cold caused by a viral infection, you may ask your physician for antibiotics to “head off” an infection. There is no evidence to support this practice since antibiotics are ineffective against viral illnesses.

It is estimated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that 1/3 of the 150 million outpatient prescriptions written for antibiotics in the United States each year are unnecessary.

This overuse of antibiotics promotes the development of antibiotic resistant bacteria. Self-treatment with antibiotics left over from a previous prescription or not completing a course of antibiotics as prescribed may create a chronic bacterial infection resistant to common antibiotics and interfere with the normal healing process.

Antibiotics are Not Effective for the Common Cold

- Common Colds and most upper respiratory infections are due to viruses
- Antibiotics are ineffective against viral infections and may in fact be harmful
- A common cold may last for 3-7 days
- Overuse of antibiotics for viral illnesses can lead to development of antibiotic resistant “super germs.”

NOTE: If acute upper respiratory symptoms last greater than 7 days, you may have a complicating bacterial infection which will require antibiotics and you should contact your healthcare provider at that time.