

Breathing Free

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Miserable because your allergy or cold lingers?

Well, you're not alone. You may be suffering from the nation's number-one chronic health problem: sinusitis. The good news for sinus sufferers is that treatment exists. Comfort and cure may be a doctor's visit away.

The nose is surrounded by four sets of sinuses, which are hollow cavities in the head. These are: the ethmoid, maxillary, frontal and sphenoid sinuses. Together, the sinuses and nose act to filter, heat, vaporize and warm the air brought through the nose into the lungs. The sinuses themselves produce mucus to cleanse inhaled air of bacteria, viruses, fungus, pollutants and dirt. This is why sinus sufferers may have exacerbations of asthma symptoms.

When the sinuses become inflamed, the membranes (sinus lining) also swell. The passageways draining the sinuses become blocked, no longer working properly. Mucus gets trapped

in the sinus cavities and can become infected: hence, sinus symptoms prevail. These may include: nasal discharge, nasal stuffiness, headaches, cough, sore throat, swollen glands, hoarseness, bad breath, mouth breathing, chapped lips, decreased sense of smell or taste, facial and dental pain, general fatigue, ear pressure, hearing loss and/or dizziness. Your partner may complain that you snore, and a good night's sleep may seem a thing of the past. Also, if you're an asthma sufferer, asthma symptoms may flare up.

Many sinus sufferers have been living with the above symptoms for prolonged periods of time; they may even begin to recognize them as usual and normal. Others may have given up on treatment, mainly because they have used numerous over-the-counter and prescription preparations to no avail.

Living with discomfort may have become an unhappy resolution-yet it doesn't have to be that way.

Who Should Seek Medical Advice

If a cold lingers for more than seven to 10 days, you should seek medical attention. Fever, nasal congestion, white, yellow or green nasal discharge, or worsening of any of the aforementioned symptoms, probably indicate infection and the need for antibiotics. Acute sinusitis will resolve with a 10-day course of

antibiotics in 90 percent of patients. Chronic sufferers will need a longer medical therapy treatment, with antibiotics and a steroid nasal spray.

About Treatment

Sinus disease is a medical condition, and can be successfully treated in about 90 percent of sufferers with medication alone. This may include a combination of nasal sprays, decongestants and antibiotics. For those who do not improve on medical therapy, a surgical procedure called a functional endoscopic sinus surgery may be the answer for final relief.

After a complete evaluation by a trained sinus specialist, patients suspected of having a chronic sinus condition should have a special X-ray called a CAT scan. This allows the physician to adequately determine the extent of sinus disease and prepare for appropriate surgical management.

With tiny telescopes and cameras, sinus surgeons reestablish the normal draining patterns within the nose, allowing relief of symptoms. The procedure is performed in same day surgery with topical and local anesthesia. The surgery is done within the nose, leaving no incision lines or scars.

Patients leave the hospital breathing more comfortably, and they may return to routine activities shortly thereafter.