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HELP FOR CHRONIC SINUS INFECTIONS

to reduce congestion and promote sinus drainage. Or make your own—it's easy and cheaper. Sterilize eight ounces of distilled water by boiling it briefly on the stove, then let it cool to room temperature. Add one-quarter teaspoon of salt to the water.

Important: Be sure to measure accurately. Too much or too little salt can damage mucus-producing cells in the nose.

Once or twice daily, use a Neti pot, sold in health-food stores, to pour the fluid into one nostril until it runs out the other nostril. Repeat on the other side.

If the above strategy doesn't help, you may need surgery to repair the septum. It's an outpatient procedure performed with local anesthesia and usually takes about one hour.

NOSE BLOWING

Blowing your nose hard can force mucus, and any germs it contains, into the sinus cavities.

Helpful: Blow one nostril at a time by pressing one closed, then the other. This causes less pressure than blowing both nostrils at the same time.

Also, inhale deeply so that the mucus travels into your throat, where you can swallow it or spit it out. Most people don't like to do this, but it won't hurt you and does help move mucus and prevent sinusitis.

Bottom Line/Health interviewed Jordan S. Josephson, MD, attending physician at Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital and a sinus specialist and functional endoscopic sinus surgeon in private practice, both in New York City.

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Sinus inflammation or infection (sinusitis) typically begins with a cold or an allergy attack that impedes the normal flow of mucus. Mucus buildup creates a favorable environment for infection to set in. Patients who reduce their congestion promptly often can avoid sinusitis or at least heal it more quickly.

However: Few people—and even some doctors—fail to realize that other, less obvious causes can trigger sinusitis...

FUNGUS

About 92% of patients with chronic (lasting 12 weeks or longer) sinusitis have fungus in their nasal mucus. New research suggests that the majority of patients with nonviral sinusitis have both fungal and bacterial infections. The majority of fungal infections are believed to be caused by household mold or mold found in public places, such as restaurants, gyms, movie theaters, etc.

To determine the type of infection, doctors should take a history, give a physical exam and, in some cases, order a computed tomography (CT) scan and/or sinus culture. Antibiotics and/or antifungal medications such as itraconazole (Sporanox) will clear the initial infection in about two weeks in patients with acute (lasting less than 12 weeks) sinusitis. Patients with chronic sinusitis may need to take the drugs for up to 12 weeks. Even in the absence of infection, a mold allergy can cause congestion that leads to sinusitis.

Helpful: Be vigilant about inspecting your home for mold and remove it promptly.

Also: Clean out your car. The combination of heat and trapped moisture provides an ideal environment for mold growth.

NASAL POLYPS

These benign tumors in the sinus cavity can be as small as the tip of a ballpoint pen

or as large as a grape. Even small polyps can obstruct sinus openings, which can allow sinusitis to develop. Polyps are diagnosed with a CT scan or endoscopy, an outpatient procedure in which a flexible lighted tube is used to examine the nasal passages.

Most polyps are caused by inflammation, usually due to allergies, infection or exposure to smoke or other pollutants, such as household chemicals or dust. Once polyps form, they can block the sinus openings and trigger more inflammation—which can lead to even more polyps.

To reduce nasal polyps, you must break the inflammatory cycle. You may need to take nasal steroid sprays or oral steroids, such as prednisone, to reduce inflammation...and antibiotics and/or oral or spray antifungal drugs to eliminate any underlying infection. If you have allergies, your doctor may recommend that you take antihistamines.

Polyps that trigger sinusitis may need to be surgically removed if drugs don't help. This outpatient procedure can be performed with local anesthesia. Polyps tend to recur, so medication still must be taken to control them.

DEVIATED SEPTUM

If the wall between the nostrils (the septum) is crooked because of an injury or anatomic abnormality, it can create air turbulence that irritates the sinus membranes and impedes normal drainage.

Warning signs: In addition to recurrent/persistent sinus infections, you may have difficulty breathing through your nose...snore loudly...or wake up with a dry mouth and chapped lips due to nighttime mouth breathing.

Patients who have a deviated septum can try to prevent sinusitis by taking steps to reduce nasal congestion.

Helpful: Irrigate the nose with a pre-mixed saline solution, sold in pharmacies,