

Headaches & Allergy

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Sinus Headaches

Sinus headaches can clearly be related to nasal allergies. The four groups of sinus cavities in the head are hollow air spaces with openings into the nose for the exchange of air and mucus. They are located inside each cheekbone, behind the eyes, behind the bridge of the nose and in the forehead. Secretions from the sinus cavities normally drain into the nose. Sinus headaches and pain occur when the sinuses are swollen and their openings into the nasal passages are obstructed, stopping normal drainage and causing pressure to build up. Often the pain is localized over the affected sinus. For example, if the maxillary sinus in the cheeks is obstructed, the cheeks can be tender to the touch and the pain may radiate to your jaw and teeth. Sinus pain can be dull to intense, and often begins in the morning and becomes less intense after you move from a lying down to an upright position. Sometimes a deviated nasal septum obstructing a sinus passage can cause chronic headaches and facial pain. The best way to determine if a nasal spur from a deviated septum is causing a headache is by looking in the nose with a small fiber-optic tube, a procedure called rhinoscopy. Your doctor can discuss this with you in more detail if you desire.

Nasal irrigations with salt water are the best treatment to relieve acute sinus pressure. Antihistamines and decongestants may also provide some immediate relief. If the area over a sinus becomes tender and a fever is present, the obstructed sinus may be infected. More intensive treatment, including antibiotics, would then be required. The best preventive medications for chronic sinusitis and related headaches are the topical nasal steroid sprays. Since allergic reactions to airborne pollens, dust, animal danders, and molds can trigger nasal symptoms and sinus headaches, immunotherapy or "allergy shots" may be recommended in some cases. However, whenever possible, it is best to avoid the allergic causes of sinus symptoms.

There are many causes of headaches. Aggressive treatment of nasal symptoms will relieve the headache only as much as the headache is caused by sinus pressure. If headaches do not improve with good nasal therapy, often an evaluation by a neurologist may yield a more specific diagnosis and treatment.

Migraine Headaches

Vascular headaches, such as migraines, are possibly related to allergies. Migraine headaches can vary from being mild to very intense and disabling. Migraines tend to be throbbing, usually one-sided headaches, which often are aggravated by sunlight and are frequently accompanied by nausea. Scientific studies have described a possible relationship between food allergy and migraine attacks, although their results have been difficult to confirm. However, most foods that trigger migraine headaches are chemical irritants to the brain; these headaches are not caused by allergic reactions. Therefore, skin testing to foods is not recommended for most patients with migraine headaches. Some migraine sufferers will benefit from a careful elimination diet of food known to cause migraine headaches. Some migraines are provoked by food additives or naturally occurring food chemicals, such as monosodium glutamate (often added to Chinese food and packaged foods), tyramine (found in many cheeses), phenylethylamine (found in chocolate) and alcohol. The artificial

sweetener aspartame and the preservative metabisulfite also may cause migraines. When foods trigger a headache, often only a few foods are culprits. By limiting or avoiding their use, you can experience near complete relief without medication.

Headache Elimination Diet

The only foods permitted are lamb, rice, boiled or baked potatoes and distilled water (for cooking, drinking, and brushing teeth); no other foods, beverages, or medications (including vitamins) are permitted. All foods except those allowed should be avoided for several days. If headaches improve, at the direction of your physician, return foods to diet one at a time to identify those that cause headaches.