

SINUS HEADACHES, SINUS DRAINAGE, AND HEAD CONGESTION

Old problems with new solutions...

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From time immemorial people have suffered from sinus disease causing headaches, trouble breathing through the nose, and sinus drainage down the back of the throat. Recent space-age technology is helping to provide rapid, efficient, and accurate diagnosis as well as effective medical treatment.

Most sinus problems are due to allergy, infection, or deformities in the anatomy of the nose and sinuses, or a combination of these factors.

Proper treatment begins with the proper diagnosis. Acute problems, such as an obvious sinus infection with fever and facial discomfort following a head cold, generally respond well to a short course of antibiotics, and require nothing more. Chronic problems, such as long-standing sinus drainage or chronic sinus headaches, may respond to antibiotics, but then recur shortly after the antibiotics are stopped. These problems may be difficult to diagnose with old technology; the appearance of the nose on conventional examination may be normal, and routine sinus x-rays may fail to demonstrate the disease. Fortunately, in these cases the cause of the problems may be pinpointed by allergy tests or endoscopic examination of the nose and new radiographic techniques.

A simple blood test, the RAST (short for Radioallergosorbant test), now gives us a great deal of information about allergic causes of nasal and sinus disease. Although the blood test has not completely eliminated conventional skin testing, it has replaced the majority of the skin tests (along with the time and discomfort required for them). The blood itself can tell us if a person is allergic, for example, to a specific animal dander, plant pollen, mold spore, and more.

Endoscopic examination of the nose is generally a painless office procedure in which the inside of the nose is examined with the use of a special telescopic instrument about half the width of a pencil, and not much longer than a pencil. Special fiberoptic fibers illuminate the inside of the nose, and the physician is able to visualize the entire nasal passage and opening of the sinuses with great clarity and magnification. Different telescopes are able to look at different angles from the tip of the instrument, so that often the inside of the sinuses can be examined as well. The examination is generally painless because numbing medication is sprayed into the nose prior to the examination. Often this examination is successful in determining a cause of recurrent or chronic sinus disease. A blockage in the opening of the sinuses where they drain into the nose is often found; this blockage can then be treated.

When indicated, special CT scans of the sinus are now performed. These provide accurate visualization of critical portions of the sinuses which cannot be seen on

conventional sinus x-rays. These scans help determine not only if the sinuses are diseased, but also exactly where the problem originates and how to best eliminate it.

Once a proper diagnosis has been made, new advances in treatment follow. Modern antibiotics and allergy medications have given us a whole new armamentarium for fighting sinus disease. Allergy treatment has never been so effective and efficient. When necessary, surgery can now be performed almost exclusively with operating endoscopes and special instruments designed for use with them. This allows surgery under excellent lighting and magnification without any facial incisions. Surgery is generally performed as outpatient, with practically no postoperative discomfort and in a new era of safety and precision. The new technologic advances in the field have dramatically helped many patients who have suffered from chronic sinus problems that could not be diagnosed in the past, or who have even failed to respond to sinus surgery in the past.