



## 7 Steps to Keep Your Sinuses Healthy

What's up with that sudden sneezing, stuffy nose, or sinus pressure? Your sinuses probably are reacting to an irritant or infection. "The nose and the sinuses are the first line of defense for your respiratory system," says Joseph E. Kelleher, MD, a specialist in allergy and immunology at the Lahey Clinic in Burlington, Mass. They are lined by the mucociliary transport system, which consists of mucous membranes and the tiny, finger-like projections known as cilia; their purpose is to warm, moisten, and filter the air you breathe. The membrane does this by producing mucus that traps irritants. Then the cilia move the mucus, along with any trapped irritants, out of your sinuses. "Anything you can do to keep the respiratory system healthy can help prevent sinus problems," adds Dr. Kelleher.

### Good Hygiene for Healthy Sinuses

Sometimes, preventing the spread of sinus problems just requires some common sense about hygiene, like covering your mouth when you sneeze or cough. "Viruses and bacteria are the most common causes of sinus infection," notes Kelleher. "They can get into your sinuses through droplets coughed or sneezed into the air by people with upper-respiratory infections and can also travel into your nose when you touch your hands to your face." Avoid close contact with anyone who has an upper-respiratory infection and wash your



face." Avoid close contact with anyone who has an upper-respiratory infection and wash your



hands frequently with soap and water to prevent introducing an infection into your sinuses or spreading infection to someone else.

### **Changes in Air Pressure**

Your sinuses are air-filled cavities within your skull; sudden pressure changes can cause air to get trapped in them, which can lead to sinus pressure, pain, and congestion. This commonly happens during air travel, so it's best to avoid flying when you have nasal and sinus congestion due to a cold or allergy. If you need to fly, ask your doctor if you should take a decongestant or a nasal spray first. Diving is another cause of sudden sinus-pressure changes. Diving can also force contaminated water from a pond or chlorinated water from a swimming pool into your sinuses and cause sinus problems.

### **Air Pollutants and Irritants**

Contaminated air inside and outside your house can cause sinus problems. "Cigarette smoke and other air pollutants decrease the effectiveness of the mucociliary transport system in the nose and sinuses, which can result in swelling and congestion," says Kelleher. Cigarette smoke — both from smoking or exposure to secondhand smoke — contains chemicals and irritants that can make allergies worse and cause other sinus problems. Wood smoke, smog, fumes, and dust are other common sources of irritants.

### **Allergy-Related Sinus Problems**

Controlling common allergens can help some people diminish sinus pressure and congestion. "For people with allergies, allergens like dust, mold, pet dander, and pollen can all lead to sinus problems," says Kelleher. You can cut back on allergy-related sinus problems by using an air conditioner in your house and your car during warm weather and keeping windows closed during pollen season. Make sure pets stay out of your bedroom and cover your mattress and pillows in plastic to prevent exposure to dander and dust mites. In addition, wear a mask if you are working in moist areas to protect against mold.

### **Keeping Your Sinuses Moist**

"Keeping your nose and sinuses moist is good for sinus health," says Kelleher. "When sinuses get too dry, the mucociliary transport system that traps and moves irritants stops working." If your house is dry, use a humidifier and keep the humidity



between 30 and 50 percent. You can check your home's humidity level with a hygrometer. "Your bedroom is the most important room in the house in which to keep a humidifier going," says Kelleher. Be sure to clean your humidifier daily, or it will become a source for sinus problems. Standing in a hot shower is another good way to moisturize your sinuses.



### **Cleaning Your Sinuses**

Studies show that flushing out your nose and sinuses with lukewarm salt water can decrease sinus infections in people with chronic sinus problems. "You can keep your sinuses clean and healthy by irrigating them with a sterile saline solution," says Kelleher. Saline nasal sprays and irrigation kits are available at pharmacies. You can also try a neti pot, which is an at-home device for cleaning out nasal and sinus passages. Neti pots are available at some pharmacies and health food stores. (just be sure to follow directions to use sterile, pre-boiled & cooled, or distilled water in your neti pot)

### **Drinking Fluids for Healthy Sinuses**

What and how much you drink can promote — or disrupt — good sinus health. "To keep the mucus produced in your sinuses flowing smoothly, you need to drink enough water," says Kelleher. "For some people, dairy products can cause mucus to thicken up, and that may cause sinus pressure and congestion." Drinking alcohol, especially red wine and beer, can also cause sinus pressure and congestion. Avoiding these beverages when you have sinus problems, and drink at least six glasses of water every day to help keep sinus mucus thin and mobile.



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