

Colds, Allergies and Sinusitis – How to Tell the Difference

This article has been reviewed by Thanai Pongdee, MD, FAAAAI

Cold weather is a prime time for stuffy noses, sore throats and watery, itchy eyes. But if your symptoms last more than a week, or if they seem to turn off and on based on your surroundings, you may be battling allergies or sinusitis. Proper diagnosis and treatment can lead to quicker recovery and less misery.

Colds are caused by a virus where allergies are caused by exposure to allergens. Colds and allergies can both lead to sinusitis which occurs when the sinuses become swollen and blocks mucous from draining, leading to painful pressure and infection.

People with allergies or asthma are more likely to develop sinusitis because their nasal and sinus tissue can become swollen when they breathe in triggers like dust, pollen or smoke.

Most cases of sinusitis resolve without antibiotics in about two weeks. Decongestants, nasal sprays, hot packs, humidifiers or salt water rinses may ease symptoms.

For people with allergies, there are steps you can take to reduce your risk of sinusitis. Your allergist/immunologist may recommend long-term treatments such as allergy shots, medication to control inflammation and avoidance of allergy triggers.



	COLDS	ALLERGIES	SINUSITIS
Symptoms	Similar to allergies, but may also include sore throat, fever and body aches	Runny or stuffy nose; sneezing; wheezing; watery or itchy eyes	Swollen, painful feeling around forehead, eyes and cheeks; stuffy nose with thick, colored mucous; bad tasting post-nasal drip; bad breath; sore throat; cough; tiredness and occasional light fever
Warning Time	Develops over several days	Begins shortly after exposure to an allergen	Stuffy nose and cough lasting longer than one or two weeks
Duration	Should clear up within several days	Lasts as long as exposure	Acute sinusitis refers to symptoms that last less than four weeks. Chronic sinusitis is when symptoms last three months or longer.

DID YOU KNOW?

- The majority of sinus infections are caused by a virus, such as a cold. Less than 2% are bacterial.
- Antibiotics don't help viral infections.
- People with allergies are more likely to suffer sinus problems.



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*Your source for more information
or to find an allergist/immunologist.*

To the Point

Knowing whether your symptoms are caused by a cold, allergies or sinusitis is the first step toward choosing the proper treatment.