

Does Your Child Have a Sinus Infection?

By Laura Frontera, M.D., FAAP

Your child is complaining about pressure in his/her face. Perhaps your child has frequent headaches or swollen eyes, particularly in the morning. Could this be a sinus infection? How can you tell?

A bacterial sinus infection usually follows the typical “cold” or an allergic inflammation. Young children usually get an average of six to eight colds in a year. Very few—less than 10%—are complicated by bacterial sinusitis.

The sinuses are the air chambers that are located inside the bones behind our cheeks, eyebrows and jaw. Sinusitis or sinus infection is an inflammation the lining of the sinuses.

A pediatrician diagnoses bacterial sinusitis in children mostly based on symptoms. However, some of those symptoms such as nasal congestion, “runny” nose, cough, postnasal drip, sore throat, and ear fullness/pressure can be the same as those of a common cold or allergies.

Symptoms

So how can we differentiate a “cold” or an allergy episode from acute bacterial sinusitis? The answer is in the length of symptoms. If your child’s symptoms last for more than 10 days or if they worsen after 5-7 days of an illness, you must check with your pediatrician as this might be a sign of sinusitis. Additional symptoms that could indicate a sinus infection are:

- bad breath
- facial pressure or pain
- headaches
- eye swelling in the mornings
- dental pain

Please do not be alarmed by green nasal discharge or by a change in the color of the nasal secretions as these are not specific signs of sinusitis.

Treatment

Bacterial sinusitis is usually treated with antibiotics for 10-14 days; symptoms will usually improve after 48-72 hours of treatment. Which antibiotic is selected is a decision made by your pediatrician on a case by case basis.

Additional therapies such as oral/nasal decongestants, antihistamines and anti-inflammatory agents are sometimes recommended, but always check with your pediatrician since not everyone will benefit from them and their use should be limited in children younger than 4 years of age.

What else can you do? Nasal irrigation with saline, steam inhalation, and drinking plenty of fluids will keep secretions thin and help clear the infection.

Prevention

So is there a way to prevent sinusitis in your child? Here are some tips:

- Do your best to avoid contact with sick people.
- Wash your hands frequently.
- Get vaccinated against Influenza virus.
- Avoid allergens that might make your allergy symptoms worse and follow medical advice for prevention and control of allergies.
- Stay away from smoke and air pollutants.
- Stay-hydrated and use saline nasal sprays to keep your nose lining moist and the mucus loose.

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