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What is Sinusitis?

Sinusitis is an infection of the paranasal sinuses. The paranasal sinuses are the empty spaces located around the nose. They are part of the respiratory system and help to give resonance to the voice. Like ear infections, sinus infections are an accumulation of infected material in the sinus cavities.

The sinuses normally drain into the nose, so any condition that causes swelling of the nose (allergies, anatomical narrowing, nasal polyps and colds) tend to block the normal sinus opening. Consequently the sinuses cannot drain normally, leading to accumulation of fluid and infection.

How can you identify a sinus infection?

Sometimes it is very difficult to do so, particularly in children because the signs and symptoms are misleading.

Classically sinusitis causes face pain, fever, post nasal drip and nasal congestion. In children non-specific signs such as persistent cough, post nasal drip and yellow or green nasal discharge are present.

Is it important to identify sinusitis?

Yes. Untreated sinus infections can eventually affect neighboring structures such as the eye and the brain. Sinusitis often co-exists with asthma. Distinguishing between the two is very difficult because both can cause a persistent cough. Sinusitis is the most common cause for lack of improvement in asthma patients.

How do you diagnose a sinus infection?

In general, the history and the physical exam are sufficient to make a diagnosis of sinusitis. In chronic cases we will do a sinus CT Scan and/or direct visualization of the nasal passages with a small scope to provide a better view of the anatomy and to help identify mechanical problems or polyps that may interfere with the normal sinus drainage.

How should we treat sinusitis?

Antibiotics are indicated for at least a period of three weeks. The treatment is lengthy because medications penetrate very slowly into the sinuses. Often, a second course of antibiotics is necessary. In addition to antibiotics a steroid nasal spray and a decongestant are also used. If following a second or third course of antibiotics there is no resolution of the infection, an ENT consultation is indicated.