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Asthma & Allergy Foundation of America, Texas Chapter, 9101 Quarter Horse Lane
Ft. Worth, TX 76123 817-297-3132 888-933-2232 info@aafatexas.org www.aafatexas.org

SINUSITIS – ARE YOU RULED BY IT?

* **Sinusitis** is an infection or inflammation of the empty spaces in our head called sinus cavities. These cavities serve no purpose other than to make our heads lighter and easier to move, yet the **lining of these cavities** DO serve an important purpose: they **protect us** from breathing in dust, pollen and other foreign matter and germs. The sinuses are lined with a membrane, a soft, moist tissue covered with mucous and densely covered with tiny hair-like cilia which act like little combs or wands moving all the pollen, germs and other irritants caught in the sinuses, then flushing them into the stomach through the back of the throat, nature's way of filtering bacteria from entering our body when we breathe.

* We have 4 pairs of sinus cavities: 2 above the eyes just behind the forehead; 2 to the side of the nose and below the eye just above the upper teeth; 2 between the eyes, and 2 far in the back of the head, far behind the eyes and above the throat, just in front of the brain case. Any complications in those particular sinus cavities are very serious.

* At any given time, more than **35 million Americans have sinusitis** which is any kind of inflammation or irritation of the sinuses and is usually caused by bacterial infections but can **also be triggered by allergies**. **Symptoms** start with a stuffy nose and heavy nasal drainage, but can also begin with nasal blockage instead or draining, and/or a thick yellow/green discharge. **Problems occur if sinusitis becomes acute** or sudden, with pain in the cheeks, forehead or between the eyes that worsens when coughing, lying down or bending over; with headache or toothache in the upper jaw; with fever or loss of sense of smell. If you have a sinus infection you not only feel miserable but this infection can weaken the whole body's mechanism for keeping other infections away because the washing action by the cilia is compromised. **And the worse your sinuses get, the worse you feel.** You can't breathe properly until the sinusitis is treated.

* **Sinusitis may be caused by** either a viral or bacterial infection and, in some patients with immune system disorders, sometimes fungus. Poorly controlled rhinitis or structural problems in the nose caused by tumors, polyps or a deviated septum (the wall that separates the left and right side of your nose) can also trigger sinusitis.

* Sinusitis **can be prevented to some extent by** learning to blow your nose gently, avoiding people who are coughing or sneezing; getting good sleep if you have a cold so you can heal properly and using nasal irrigation to remove mucous.

* Sinusitis **can be treated by** decongestants to help unblock the nose or an antibiotic to fight the infection if it's bacterial. The problem with repeated bacterial sinus infections and antibiotic use is that eventually the body becomes immune to the antibiotics and later, if there is an infection elsewhere in the body, it's hard to discover an antibiotic that will be effective.

* One of the **most painful results of sinusitis** may be **sinus headache**. A sinus headache **can occur without infection** when the sinus cavities are inflamed as a result of air, pus or mucus being trapped in blocked sinuses. Often sinus headaches are confused with migraines since they have similar symptoms. In a sinus headache, besides a pain behind the forehead, you may experience pain and pressure around the eyes or across the cheeks made more intense if you bend forward or lie down. There may also be pain in the upper teeth, fever and chills, facial swelling, stuffiness and a green or yellow nasal discharge.

* Relief is the goal if you have a sinus headache. The **key to relief** is to **reduce the swelling** in the sinuses and to **unblock the mucous** so it can drain more efficiently. Some patients are helped by non-drug treatments such as inhaling hot, moist air either from a vaporizer or even a shower or steam from a pan of boiling salted water or by alternately applying hot and cold packs (3 minutes with a hot compress then 30 seconds with a cold one, repeat 3 times at least 2-6 times the day); by drinking lots of hot tea and chicken soup; through plenty of rest and by using a saline (salt water) nasal irrigation which washes away the pollen, irritants, pollution and bacteria thus reducing the inflammation. Irrigation shrinks the sinus membranes making drainage possible. There are drugstore irrigation kits or ask your healthcare provider how to make your own home irrigation solution with salt and baking soda and distilled water

* For some, pain can also be effectively treated with OTC medications, pain relievers containing aspirin, ibuprofen, naproxen or acetaminophen. Take precautions with these drugs if you have aspirin sensitive asthma or are taking medications for heart or high blood pressure conditions. **Before using any drug therapy always speak to your healthcare provider.** If your sinusitis is caused by allergies, some sinus headaches may be helped by taking decongestants and/or antihistamines. Sometimes steroidal nasal sprays might be prescribed by your physician for difficult cases. But if none of these remedies help, if you have **chronic** (constant or continual) **rather than acute sinusitis, ask your physician for other treatment options.** Your healthcare provider may recommend a CT scan to determine how blocked your sinuses are. If the condition is chronic perhaps endoscopic or minimally invasive surgery might be the treatment that works best. As always, consult with your physician for any respiratory problems. For more information on allergies and rhinitis, ask AAFA-TX.

Upcoming Free AAFA-TX Programs: **1) June 7** "Diagnosing & Managing Asthma 2008" LaQuinta Inn, Arlington, a CME symposium for physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, nurses and respiratory therapists worth 4.5 cat. 1 CME, 4.5 CE for nurses. William Lumry, MD, Robert Rogers, MD, Eric Schmitt, MD, William A. Neaville, MD, faculty, Gerald Moore, MD, moderator, Rebecca Gruchalla, MD, program director. Pre-registration required by email info@aafatexas.org. **2) June 18** "Tools To Manage Asthma & Allergies" Wellness Program, ExxonMobil, Las Colinas, Dr. John Meiser, faculty. **3)** See our website, <http://aafatexas.org/events.htm> for a list of Texas Asthma Camps 2008. For more info, visit aafatexas.org or email info@aafatexas.org.