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Sinus Infections

By: Dr. Stephen O'Neil

I am often asked if chiropractic adjustments or acupuncture can relieve the pain and pressure of sinus infections and congestion. Sinus infections or sinusitis is an infection or inflammation of the air filled pockets in the bones of the face. It is one of the most common health care complaints in North America, affecting nearly 50 million people per year. Some researchers estimate that as much as 14 percent of the population suffers from chronic (long term) sinusitis.

All humans have four pairs of sinuses in the face. These sinuses produce mucus for the nasal passages and throat. They also have small hair like structures known as cilia. The function of sinuses is three fold: 1) decrease the weight of the skull 2) warm the air we breathe 3) act as a mucus factory to filter the air. The mucus traps dirt and debris brought in by the air. This dirty mucus is then moved out of the sinus through a drain hole known as an ostia.

Sinusitis occurs when the lining of the sinuses becomes inflamed and swells. This can happen as a result of inhaling irritants such as chemicals or particles causing allergies. The ostia or drain hole may then become plugged with the excess mucus and swollen tissues. This creates an optimal environment for viruses or bacteria to flourish. As the sinuses fill up and the lining becomes even more irritated, pressure builds up often causing headaches and that common plugged feeling. When this occurs often, the lining of the sinuses becomes scarred and damaged and the person becomes more susceptible to further infections. This constant irritation can lead to mechanical blockages from growths known as nasal polyps.

The medical treatment of choice for sinusitis, if it is not complicated with any mechanical blockages, is generally antibiotics. Due to severe overuse of these medications, they have become less effective in treating even simple acute sinusitis. Herbal therapies often work well with no side effects. Echinacea, garlic, goldenseal and ginger root tea can help relieve pressure build up by decreasing mucus production and breaking up blockages. Simply using hot eucalyptus or lavender compresses can break up mucus and help things drain.

Chiropractic care does not directly treat sinus infections but many patients have great results with chiropractic adjustments. A chiropractic adjustment works to free up any nerve interference in the spine to promote proper function. Adjusting the cervical vertebrae stimulates the nerves that control the function of the sinuses. This can often be enough to trigger a decrease in pressure and increase drainage. This works particularly well when combined with acupuncture or acupressure, which will greatly reduce the pain and discomfort associated with sinusitis. Certain acupuncture points also stimulate the nerves and sinus membranes to reduce inflammation. The pressure headaches associated with these conditions are almost always relieved with the acupuncture and some home trigger point therapy. A gentle tug on the ear lobe can help change the pressure in the eustation tube in the ear and promote proper drainage. When combined, these therapies can relieve the symptoms of sinusitis and promote proper overall wellbeing. See your chiropractor for a wellness assessment and start on the road to optimal health.