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Is It Really Just a Cold?

Ear, Nose, and Throat Doctors Distinguish Sinusitis from the Common Cold

Alexandria, Va. - As the temperature drops and the holidays approach, people are busy bundling up and buying gifts. During such a busy season, many will come down with what they think is a common cold, but the American Academy of Otolaryngology - Head and Neck Surgery (AAO-HNS) wants patients to recognize the difference between cold and flu symptoms and a more serious infection like sinusitis.

Approximately 31 million people are afflicted with sinusitis each year, making it one of the most common health conditions in America. Symptoms of the common cold can mimic the beginning stages of a more serious sinus infection, leading to delayed treatment and symptom relief.

Sinusitis is an infection of the sinus cavities caused by viruses or bacteria. It usually is preceded by a cold, allergy attack, or irritation by environmental pollutants. Unlike a cold, which is always viral, bacterial sinusitis requires a physician's diagnosis and may require treatment with an antibiotic to cure the infection and prevent future complications.

When someone comes down with a cold, they typically experience a sore throat, cough, runny nose, and body aches. The difference between the symptoms of the common cold and a sinus infection is that sinus infections have cloudy or colored nasal drainage accompanied by nasal congestion, facial pain-pressure-fullness, or both. A sinus infection is likely bacterial if it lasts 10 days or longer, or if the symptoms worsen within 10 days after initial improvement (double-worsening). If a cold or flu persists for more than two weeks, a physician should be consulted.

Maintaining sinus health during the cold and flu season can help prevent a case of sinusitis. The AAO-HNS suggests the following ways to keep your sinuses clear:

- Drink plenty of fluids to keep nasal discharge thin and keep your body hydrated.
- You may get some relief from your symptoms with a humidifier, particularly if room air in your home is heated by a forced-air system.
- If you are going to fly during the holiday season, use a nasal spray decongestant before take-off to prevent blockage of the sinuses allowing mucus to drain.
- Avoid smoking and drinking alcohol, as both can irritate your nasal passages.
- If you have allergies, try to avoid contact with things that trigger attacks. If you cannot, use over-the-counter or prescription antihistamines and/or a prescription nasal spray to control allergy attacks.

For more information on ear, nose, and throat health this winter season, visit the AAO-HNS website at <http://www.entnet.org>.

About the AAO-HNS

The American Academy of Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery (www.entnet.org), one of the oldest medical associations in the nation, represents nearly 12,000 physicians and allied health professionals who specialize in the diagnosis and treatment of disorders of the ears, nose, throat, and related structures of the head and neck. The Academy serves its members by facilitating the advancement of the science and art of medicine related to otolaryngology and by representing the specialty in governmental and socioeconomic issues. The organization's vision: "Empowering otolaryngologist-head and neck surgeons to deliver the best patient care."

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