

Is it a cold, is it allergies, or is it sinusitis?

By Spencer C. Payne, MD

Assistant Professor

Division of Rhinology & Sinus Surgery

Department of Otolaryngology - Head & Neck Surgery University of Virginia Health System

As Punxsutawney Phil did not see his shadow this year, spring is fast upon us. With the change in seasons and the upcoming release of tree pollen many Americans will suffer from nasal and sinus irritation. It may, however, be difficult to determine which of several causes may bring about that itchy, sneezy, stuffy, so you can't sleep sensation. Is it a cold, is it allergies, or is it sinusitis?

At their core, all three of these problems involve an irritation and inflammation of the lining of the nose and sinuses. In fact because of the continuum of symptoms, sinusitis is also often referred to as rhinosinusitis to indicate that symptoms often start and involve the nose, similar to rhinitis. The differences can sometimes be subtle and may require an Otolaryngologist or Ear, Nose and Throat surgeon to determine just which one may be affecting you. Certain symptoms can be more likely associated with one than the other so it is important to pay attention to how you are feeling so you can discuss these with the doctor.

Nasal and sinus allergies result when various substances gain access to the body through the nose, throat or eyes and stimulate the release of histamine. Typically these allergens are airborne and are easily inhaled or make contact with the body. The histamine, and other chemicals released by the body, can cause the lining of the nose and sinuses to swell, resulting in congestion and a "stuffy nose." Similarly, increased mucous production and the subsequent "runny nose" will send many allergy sufferers running for the tissue box. An itchy nose, throat and eyes that are also watery often come along as well.

Many of these symptoms are similar to the common cold which often lasts a week or so. Allergies, however, tend to vary in their severity, often as a result of the degree of exposure to the specific substance that one is allergic too. Tree pollen is the most common spring allergen, while grass pollens, ragweed, and mold follow during the summer and fall. These seasonal allergens may cause more severe instant problems than the perennial or indoor allergens such as dust and dust mites, but the stuffy, runny nose can be just as worse.

Unlike allergies, colds are caused by viruses which have gotten into the nose and throat. It is quite common for children to get up to six colds every year as their immune system develops. In addition to the nasal problems of allergies, a sore throat and cough often develop as well and it may be these symptoms that help differentiate a cold from allergies.

The inflammation that results from allergies and colds can often cause the openings to the sinuses to close off resulting in sinusitis. This may be what is happening if you develop a fever, facial pain and/or pressure, and your symptoms have lasted over a week. More times than not, sinusitis is caused by a virus but in small percentage of patients various bacteria may also infect the sinus, often making the symptoms

worse. Your otolaryngologist can help diagnose when sinusitis is due to a bacteria, but do not be surprised if antibiotics are not recommended.

In lieu of antibiotics, relief from allergies, colds, and sinusitis are available at your local drug store. One of the more soothing, and effective methods of treating these is with simple salt water (saline) sprays and flushes. Various over-the-counter decongestants and anti-histamines may also be effective, but given some of their side effects, you should consult with your doctor to make sure they may be right for you.