

By Charles Matthews, MD

Here at the North Carolina Comprehensive Headache Clinic near Rex Hospital, we are seeing a large number of patients who are convinced that they have sinus headaches—yet they are not getting well with sinus treatment. The good news is that recent studies have clarified the relationship between “sinus problems” and migraine—and this understanding has led to effective new treatment for sinus headache.

We are getting increasing referrals from our ENT colleagues asking for help at the Headache Clinic with their sinus patients, asking us to explore the relationship between sinuses that hurt and migraines. If surgery is not clearly indicated, what else is effective?

I have included some information from The Asthma Center Education and Research Fund ([www.theasthmacenter.org](http://www.theasthmacenter.org)) in the box below. If you are a “sinus sufferer,” this may be about you.

# It's Sinus Season

## at the Headache Clinic!



Dr. Matthews explores the cause of a migraine headache.

## SINUS HEADACHES AND MIGRAINES\*

Migraines and sinusitis are common problems for about 10 – 20 percent of Americans, respectively. If you experience recurrent headaches associated with discomfort around the eyes and nasal congestion, you may believe you have “sinus headaches.” However, you may actually have migraine headaches with no associated sinusitis.

For example, in a recent study, four out of 10 individuals with a diagnosis of sinus headaches actually met criteria for the diagnosis of migraine headaches. In another study, 90 percent of participants who thought they had sinus headaches met criteria for migraine headaches.

One reason for the confusion is due to widespread consumer advertisements directed at relief for “sinus” or “sinus headaches” for any pain felt in the mid-facial area. Recent studies have shown that symptoms like congestion, runny nose, and tearing typically attributed to sinus headaches may be experienced during migraines.

In addition nasal allergy, chronic sinus disease and migraine can all be triggered by weather changes. Therefore a history of weather-change-induced headaches does not help distinguish nasal allergy from symptoms for migraines or sinusitis. To complicate matters, up to one-third of individuals with upper respiratory allergies also have migraines.

How then do you know when facial headache and pressure is due to sinusitis or allergies and when it is due to a migraine or other forms of headache? Without nasal discharge, fever and CT evidence of sinusitis, you may think you are experiencing “sinus headaches” but actually have non-sinus related migraine headaches. This is particularly true if headaches are associated with nausea, vomiting, visual disturbances, light and noise sensitivity.

If you suffer from both sinus disease and migraine, the pressure experienced within the sinuses can often trigger a secondary attack of migraine. Unfortunately, few recognize the connection among sinus disease, migraines and allergies.

Migraine headaches are caused by the widening or dilation of blood vessels in and around the brain and the activation and inflammation of the trigeminal nerve and/or branches of the trigeminal nerve.

The trigeminal nerve reaches three distinct branches over the face, covering the membranes and surface of the face, including ophthalmic, maxillary and mandibular divisions (sensory pathway). Migraine pain is usually moderate to severe and often pulsating. It can be experienced on one or both sides of the face or head and can be felt in various locations along the trigeminal nerve and its branches, such as on top of the head, behind the eyes, below or above the eyes, in the sinuses, or in the back of the head or neck. It is often associated with vomiting, nausea, sensitivity to light, noise and movement with or without visual disturbances.

In addition to the pain, migraines may be accompanied by runny nose, nasal congestion and tearing. Therefore, when nasal symptoms occur during a migrainous event, they appear to be triggered neurologically but can be confused with symptoms of sinus disease and/or allergy.

\*This information is reprinted from the Asthma Center Education and Research Fund website: [www.theasthmacenter.org](http://www.theasthmacenter.org).

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### OTHER HEADACHES AFFECTING SINUS

I would add to this very informative article that two types of chronic headaches (both migraine and cluster) can lead to chronic sinus infections. These types of headaches cause problems with regulating the blood vessels of the sinuses, leading to excessive fluid accumulation that can act as a culture medium for infections. So, headaches cause sinus problems, and sinus problems cause headaches.

The subject of this issue of *Health & Healing* is *Attaining Optimum Health*. At the Headache Clinic, we welcome new patient sinus sufferers. If you have chronic sinus pain, the good news is that in many cases the Headache Clinic can treat it effectively, and help you along your own path to optimal health.

To schedule a new patient appointment at the Headache Clinic, please call 781-7423. Mary or Karin will be happy to assist you.

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The North Carolina Comprehensive Headache Clinic provides outpatient-neurological evaluations and comprehensive treatment for the patient with headache, facial pain and neck pain. New patients are welcome.

For information or to schedule an appointment, contact:

**NORTH CAROLINA COMPREHENSIVE HEADACHE CLINIC**

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For more information, please visit our website at:

[www.ncheadache.com](http://www.ncheadache.com)

Click through to educational links with our national organizations, including the American Academy of Neurology, the National Headache Foundation, and the American Council on Headache Education.