

# Your Journey with Sinusitis



For more information scan this QR code or go to [myhealth.alberta.ca/sinusitis-pathway](https://myhealth.alberta.ca/sinusitis-pathway)

**Sinusitis (sometimes called rhinosinusitis, meaning swollen sinuses) usually starts as a viral infection. Face pain and pressure, with a blocked nose are some of the symptoms of sinusitis. It is important to follow the management steps within this pathway, which can stop sinusitis from getting worse.**

You are the most important part of your healthcare team. This guide will help you to know what to expect as you work with your healthcare team to manage and treat sinusitis. If you have any questions along the way, please ask your team. Click on the page numbers in blue if you want more information about the step in your journey.

## Before your appointment ([page 5](#))

- Write down how you feel, and your questions, symptoms, and concerns.
- Consider bringing a family member or friend to support you.



## Visit your healthcare provider ([page 6](#))

- It is important to tell your healthcare provider when the symptoms began, so they can determine how to best support your health.
- Your healthcare provider will ask you questions about how you feel and what your symptoms are. Is your nose blocked? What colour is the mucus from a runny nose? Do you have pain or pressure around your nose and/or eyes? Is mucus draining down your throat? How is your ability to smell?
- Share all of your symptoms and concerns. Your health includes physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, and social elements.

## Review your treatment & management options ([page 8](#))

- It is very important that you understand how to use the treatment options properly. Options may include saline rinses of your nose/sinuses, nasal sprays, and when/how often to take medicine.
- Remember, there can be a lot of information to take in. Ask questions and make sure you are voicing your wishes on how you want your care managed.

## Start your treatment & watch your symptoms ([page 11](#))

- Sinusitis can take several weeks, or even months, to get better once treatment begins.
- Be patient and be focused on the proper ways to perform saline rinsing and how to use nasal sprays.
- Take an active role in your treatment.
- Write down any changes you notice in your symptoms.
- Ask what to watch for, and when to come back if your symptoms don't improve, or get worse.

## Get your tests ([page 12](#))

If needed, your tests and assessments may include:

- Blood work
- CT scan - If your symptoms are not getting better after a prolonged time of proper management, you may need to have a CT scan (special X-ray) to see how swollen your sinuses are.
- A specialist may also need to look deep into your nose with a small camera on a flexible tube (endoscopy).

## Review your test results ([page 12](#))

- Talk with your healthcare provider so you know what your test results mean and next steps.
- If you had a CT scan, the results will help determine what treatment is recommended, which could include surgery.
- You may find some of your test results on MyHealth Records or MyAHS Connect ([myhealth.alberta.ca/myhealthrecords](https://myhealth.alberta.ca/myhealthrecords)).

## Talk with your healthcare provider about a referral ([page 14](#))

- Your healthcare provider will know when it is time for you to see a specialist.
- Ask who you are being sent to and what they do.
- Ask how long it will take to be seen and what you should do if you don't hear back.

## Keep taking care of yourself ([page 15](#))

- Keep taking care of your overall health.
- Look for other healthy lifestyle resources and supports.



Whole-person health ([page 2](#))

### Important Tips:

#### Need a family doctor?

[ahs.ca/findadoctor](https://ahs.ca/findadoctor)

#### Need a translator?

Let your healthcare provider know

#### Need health advice?

Call Health Link at 811

#### Need to find programs and services in your community?

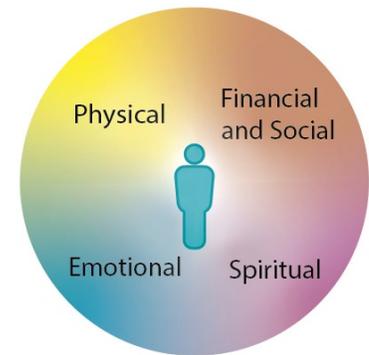
Call 211 or visit [ab.211.ca](https://ab.211.ca)

## Whole-person health

The whole-person health approach will help you and your healthcare team better manage your health condition. It is drawn from the teachings of the medicine wheel.

Whole-person health means thinking about all parts of your health and wellness: physical, financial and social, spiritual, and emotional. All of these parts are connected and influence each other. It's important to be aware of your personal needs in each part and to share that information with your healthcare team.

- **Physical:** your specific health conditions and how well your body works
- **Financial and Social:** your ability to meet your housing, transportation, food, and health needs, feeling supported to manage your daily life, and having meaningful relationships
- **Spiritual:** your beliefs, sense of connection, and purpose
- **Emotional:** how you think, feel, and cope with life events



**Whole-person health**

Whole-person health also reminds us that we are all connected and work together: you, your support systems, and your healthcare providers. Your healthcare providers could be your doctor, nurse practitioner, or a team that comes together with you to plan and organize your care.

Your healthcare provider needs to understand who you are and what matters to you. This helps to build trust. But it can be hard to know what to share or what to say. Try starting by asking yourself:

**“What are the things in my life that are important to me?”**

**“What are the things in my life that may be affecting my health and well-being?”**



Continued on next page.

Here are some examples of things you may want to talk about with your healthcare provider:



### **Physical**

“My symptoms are making it hard for me to do my job.”

“Because of my pain and how hard it is for me to move around, it’s hard to take care of myself.”

### **Financial and Social**

“I’m worried I won’t be able to get to all of my appointments.”

“I need my daughter with me as a translator.”

“I’m not sure how I will pay for my medications this month.”

### **Emotional**

“I’m lonely and have no one to talk to.”

“I have a lot of stress and I’m not sure how to manage it.”

“Ever since my friend died, I’ve been struggling with my feelings.”

### **Spiritual**

“It’s important that I follow traditional healing practices.”

“How can I include my culture’s foods and family recipes in my nutrition plan?”

“It’s important that my religious practice of fasting is respected and brought into my care.”

## What is sinusitis?

Sinusitis is swelling and inflammation in the nose and sinuses. It is sometimes called rhinosinusitis (“rhino” is a word that can refer to the nose).

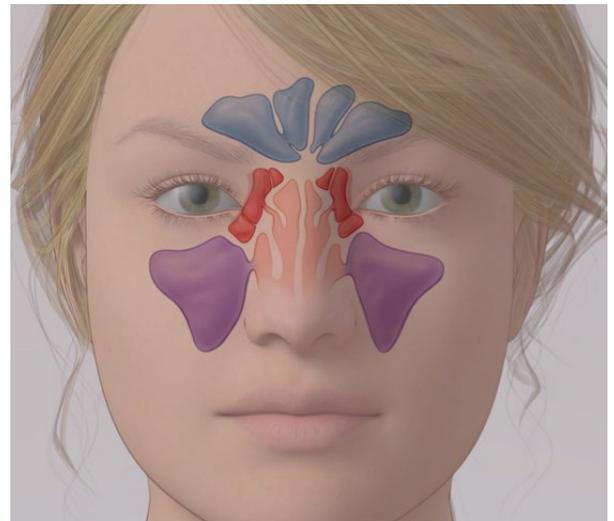
Sinuses are air-filled structures inside your forehead and face. The lining of the sinuses produces mucus that drains out of your nose. The mucus traps bacteria, allergens, and germs, which helps to keep your nose clean.

Viruses like the common cold can affect your sinuses by causing too much mucus production. Also, the lining of the sinuses can become swollen. The swelling can result in facial pain and a feeling of pressure around your nose and eyes. The swelling can also be in your nose, which can cause a blockage where the mucus does not drain properly. The mucus can build up in the sinuses, which can lead to an infection. It is best to treat these symptoms early before a bacterial infection can take hold.

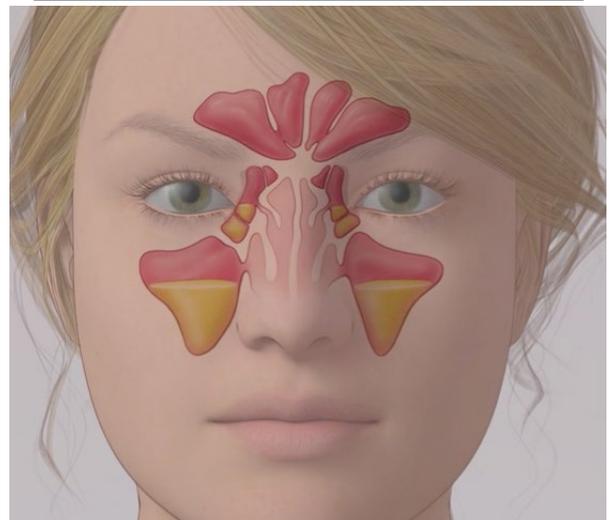
It is important that you understand how to use the treatments for sinusitis. For example, saline (mild saltwater solution) rinses can be uncomfortable and difficult to do properly at first. With practice and persistence, you will learn how to perform a saline rinse effectively. Saline rinses are an effective way to help built-up mucus drain from your sinuses. If you are unsure if you are doing any management options properly, speak with a member of your healthcare team.

To learn more about sinusitis, a short educational video is available at [MyHealth.Alberta.ca](https://myhealth.alberta.ca). Once on the main page of MyHealth Alberta, search for “sinusitis,” or you can [click here](#) to see the sinusitis page.

**Location of healthy and clear sinuses**



**Swollen sinuses with mucus buildup**



Both Images copyright 2023 Healthwise

## Before your appointment

Here are some tips to help you get ready for your appointment with your healthcare provider:

- Use a symptom tracker to write down important information to share with your healthcare team about your symptom(s).
- Your healthcare provider will evaluate sinusitis based on a collection of signs and symptoms. Be prepared to answer questions related to:
  - Do you feel any pain or pressure in your face, around your eyes, or both?
  - Is your nose blocked or runny? What colour is the mucus?
  - Do you feel mucus draining from the back of your nose down your throat?
  - Is your sense of smell affected?
  - How long have you had the symptoms?
  - Have your symptoms changed or worsened since they started?
- A symptom tracker can help you remember what symptoms you're feeling, when it started, how often it happens, and what makes it better or worse.
- Write down a list of your questions and concerns. When you're done, read your list and mark the most important things to you.
- Make a list of all the prescription and over-the-counter medicines you take, take photos of your medicines on your phone, or plan to bring a bag with your medicines. Include any vitamins, supplements, ointments, herbs, and muscle stimulators.
- Ask someone you trust to go with you to your appointment. They can help you ask questions, write down instructions, and remember explanations.



### Helpful tools and resources

#### Use a symptom tracker

[hqca.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/HQCA-Symptom-Tracker-March-23-2022.pdf](https://hqca.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/HQCA-Symptom-Tracker-March-23-2022.pdf)

To get the most out of your visit, plan to write notes during the visit or see the Alberta Health Services **My Care Conversations app** ([ahs.ca/careapp](https://ahs.ca/careapp)) website for more information about recording your conversation with your healthcare provider.



### Healthcare provider's assessment

Your healthcare provider's assessment will include asking you questions about your symptoms and how long you have had them. They may also examine your throat and ears.

Your healthcare provider will be able to determine sinusitis based on the questions they ask and their physical exam.

### PODS Criteria

PODS is a memory prompt for recalling the signs of sinusitis. Your healthcare provider may use the following criteria to suspect sinusitis:

Nasal obstruction OR purulent (pus like) runny nose plus one or more of the following:

**P** – Facial Pressure or Pain

**O** – Obstruction (blocked nose)

**D** – Posterior nasal Discharge (mucus draining down your throat)

**S** – Loss of Smell

### What should I watch for (symptoms of concern)?

Be aware of:

- Clear fluid from your nose that turns to yellow or green and becomes thicker. This could mean that early sinusitis is getting worse and becoming infected.
- If the treatments you've started are not starting to work after more than three days.

**If you have any of the following, do not delay getting medical help.** If you cannot see your healthcare provider in the same day, consider calling [811 Health Link](#), or go to the nearest emergency department or urgent care center if:

- You have swelling and redness around your eyes
- Your vision is affected.
- You, your friends, family, or caregivers notice you are confused or very lethargic.
- You, your friends, family, or caregivers notice any facial drooping or sagging.

### What should I share with my healthcare provider?

- If you have had sinusitis in the past, it is important to share how often it has occurred and what worked for you the last time.
- If you have allergies and are exposed to an environment that could make your sinusitis worse. Examples include dust, extreme cold, pollen, etc.

- What impact the health condition or issue is having on things that are important to you, like your job, hobbies and interests, and relationships?
- What types of things help you work better with your healthcare team and what you expect and need from the relationship with your healthcare provider?
- There are lots of things in your life that can impact your ability to manage your health, like:
  - Problems with money, housing, and access to transportation.
  - Alcohol or drug use.
  - Not enough support or help.
  - Childhood experiences.

It's important to talk about these things with your healthcare provider because they all play a role in your health and well-being.

**You are the most important part of your healthcare team.**

If you don't understand what your healthcare team is telling you, let them know right away. Be open and honest. You might say:

**“This is new to me. Could you please explain it slowly, using language that is easier to understand?”**

**“It sounded like you said that I should... Did I understand that correctly?”**

**“Can you show me a picture or model to help me understand?”**



## Helpful tools and resources

- Making the most of your appointment: [myhealth.alberta.ca/health/pages/conditions.aspx?Hwid=hw226888](https://myhealth.alberta.ca/health/pages/conditions.aspx?Hwid=hw226888)
- Working with your healthcare team: [hqca.ca/for-patients-and-families/working-with-your-healthcare-team](https://hqca.ca/for-patients-and-families/working-with-your-healthcare-team)



## Review your treatment & management options

In most cases, sinusitis can be well managed at home with the guidance of your healthcare provider. The medical management (not surgical) steps for sinusitis are aimed at keeping the sinuses well drained and reducing swelling.

### Medical treatment options:

- 1. Nasal saline rinse:** a flexible bottle with a rubber tip is used to spray a mild saltwater solution into one nostril. The fluid will go up your nose, rinse your sinuses, and exit out the opposite nostril.

You can find a selection of saline sinus rinse kits and distilled water at your local pharmacy. These commercial kits come with the correct type of powder to mix with distilled water. Be sure to follow all instructions carefully. Using warm, not hot, water can be more comfortable. You may want to try both types to see what works best for you.

### DO NOT USE TAP WATER

Tap water contains a small amount of impurities that could make your sinusitis worse.

Squeeze bottle kits with packets of powder to mix with distilled water are preferred over other saline rinse methods. The squeeze bottles provide the pressure needed to rinse your sinuses.

For more information about saline rinsing, head to:  
<https://myhealth.alberta.ca> and search "saline rinse"



Adobe Stock Licensed Image

Saline rinse devices that resemble a tea pot are not recommended by specialists. These devices do not produce the required pressure that specialists say is needed to rinse your sinuses effectively.



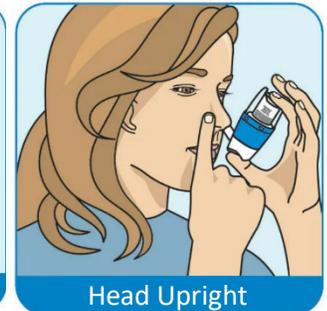
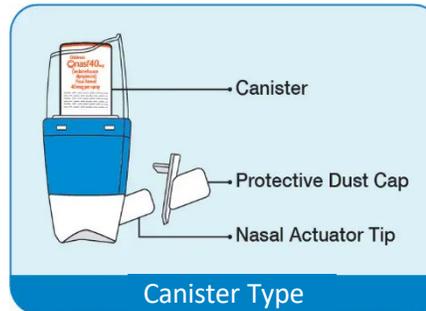
### Nasal Rinse



Lexicomp and UpToDate Patient Handouts: How to Do a Nasal Rinse, by Lippincott Advisor, 2020. Copyright 2024 by Lippincott

## Other treatment options:

- Nasal spray:** Do not use nasal decongestant sprays for more than two days. Overuse of nasal decongestants can result in worse nasal blockage. Over-the-counter (OTC) nasal decongestants can be purchased from any drug store. Your healthcare provider may choose to prescribe a nasal spray that contains different or stronger ingredients. It is important to understand how to use nasal sprays correctly.



Adapted from ENT Education Swansea. CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Source: National Library of Medicine

### Steps for using a pump or squeeze bottle spray:

1. Gently blow your nose to remove as much mucus as you can.
2. Shake the bottle and squirt a small amount into the air to ensure the spray tip is full (first use each day).
3. **Tilt your head forward** and breathe out slowly.
4. Insert tip into your nose and block the other nostril.
5. As you breathe in, squeeze the bottle, or depress the pump.
6. Try not to sneeze or blow your nose after (you will expel the medicine).

### Steps for using a canister nasal spray:

1. Gently blow your nose to remove as much mucus as you can.
2. Shake the canister several times.
3. **Hold head upright** and breathe out slowly.
4. Insert tip into your nose and block the other nostril.
5. As you breathe in, depress the canister.
6. Try not to sneeze or blow your nose after (you will expel the medicine).

- Antibiotics:** Antibiotics are used only when signs of infection are present. They are not a first-line treatment. Your healthcare provider will know when to prescribe antibiotics, and it is important to watch for signs such as mucus changing colour to yellow or green, or your symptoms getting worse. Let your healthcare team know right away.
- Surgery:** If sinusitis becomes severely infected, or advances to the point it becomes designated as "chronic" sinusitis, you may be referred to a specialist. The details of any procedure will be shared when you meet the specialist.

5. Asking the following questions can help you make an informed decision about your different treatment & management options, and decide which one(s) will work best for you:

**“What are the advantages and disadvantages of each option?”**

**“Can I use any of these options together?”**

**“How will this option make me feel? Will it have side effects?”**

**“What results can I expect?”**





## Start your treatment & watch your symptoms

As you try the treatment options you chose, remember that if something doesn't work the way you thought it would, think about other options and connect with your healthcare provider to find a treatment that will work for you.

Remember to watch for and talk to your healthcare team soon if you experience:

- Worsening symptoms including increasing facial pain/pressure.
- A runny nose that changes from clear mucus to coloured yellow or green.

**If you have any of the following, do not delay getting medical help.** If you cannot see your healthcare provider in the same day, consider calling [Health Link at 811](#), or go to the nearest emergency department or urgent care center if:

- You have swelling and redness around your eyes.
- Your vision is affected.
- You, your friends, family, or caregivers notice you are confused or very lethargic.
- You, your friends, family, or caregivers notice any facial drooping or sagging.

You can clarify with your healthcare team what to expect in terms of follow-up communication.

Call your healthcare team whenever you:

- Have questions.
- Notice your symptoms getting worse.
- Have problems with your medicine.
- Haven't gotten test results or heard back about an appointment in the time you had agreed to.



### Helpful tools and resources

If you can't reach your healthcare provider and need health advice or information, call Health Link anytime, day or night, by dialing **811**.





## Get your tests

The tests related to sinusitis are only done if the condition has lasted for a prolonged time despite proper management. At this point, ongoing sinusitis is considered “chronic sinusitis” and the severity of the inflammation in your sinuses must be tested. Your healthcare provider will know when to order a CT scan or to refer you to a specialist for endoscopy.

**Blood tests** - Your care provider may order some blood tests to explore the reasons why you maybe experiencing sinusitis.

**CT scan** – A Computed Tomography (CT) scanner is a special type of X-ray. It can take very detailed three-dimensional pictures of the structures in your body. You will lie on an X-ray table, and the table will automatically slide into a large donut-shaped device. You must lie very still during the CT scan. [Computed Tomography \(CT\) Scan: About This Test \(myhealth.alberta.ca\)](http://myhealth.alberta.ca).

**Endoscopy** – An otolaryngologist (an ear, nose and throat specialist) may use a camera on the end of a small flexible tube to look deep into your nose and sinuses. You will be given a nasal decongestant and a numbing spray before the test.

Helpful tools and resources on next page.



## Review your test results

It is important to know what your test results are and what they mean. Take time to discuss your results with your healthcare provider. Medical terms can be hard to understand. Even common words like “positive” or “negative” might mean something different for medical tests. Ask your healthcare provider for explanations and examples to make sure you fully understand.

You might ask:

“What does this mean for me?”

“Is there a current concern? If so, what is it?”

“Did the CT scan show a need for referral?”

“Did the endoscopy show anything?”



Helpful tools and resources on next page.



## Helpful tools and resources

You may find some of your results and health information using secure online tools:

### **MyHealth Records**

See your lab results, immunizations, and some other results with a MyHealth Records account.

Sign up at [myhealth.alberta.ca/myhealthrecords](https://myhealth.alberta.ca/myhealthrecords).

### **MyAHS Connect**

See your health information, manage your Alberta Health Services appointments, and interact directly with some members of your healthcare team. Ask your healthcare provider how to

access your MyAHS Connect account. Learn more at [ahs.ca/myahsconnect](https://ahs.ca/myahsconnect).



## Talk with your healthcare provider about a referral

As stated briefly in the “Review your treatment options” section above, your healthcare provider may refer you to a specialist (otolaryngologist).

- The role of an otolaryngologist is to treat conditions related to the ears, nose, neck, and throat.
- The goal of managing sinusitis is to attempt up to a 12-week interval of medical management before a referral. Sinusitis can take several weeks to improve, but only if a dedicated treatment plan is followed correctly.
- It is important to continue nasal rinsing at the direction of your healthcare provider, and take all medicine as prescribed, even if you are feeling better before you finish the medicine.
- If you don't hear about your referral after 6 weeks, contact your healthcare provider and ask about the status of the referral.

**CT scan before you see a specialist:** A CT scan (special three-dimensional X-ray) is required to help the specialist determine how severe your sinus swelling is, and what the surgical options may be. Your healthcare provider will request a CT scan appointment on your behalf.

It is important to attend this appointment, so if scheduling conflicts exist contact the CT scan office immediately to rebook.

Your specialist will meet with you to discuss your health concerns and look at your test results. The specialist may diagnose your concern, order more tests, or discuss treatment and management options with you.

You can find out more about the referral criteria for a specialist by asking your healthcare provider.



### Helpful tools and resources

To learn about how to prepare for your specialist appointment, visit [ahs.ca/quire](https://ahs.ca/quire).



## Keep taking care of yourself

Remember that sinusitis can take several weeks to show any signs of improvement. You and your healthcare provider will discuss the various steps that you can take at home to help improve symptoms, reduce swelling, and prevent infection if caught early enough.

Speak with your healthcare provide about pain medicines. In most cases, over the counter (OTC) medicines such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like ibuprofen or naproxen can help with the discomfort. Always discuss pain management options with your care team.

Try your best to be successful with saline rinsing. It can take some practice to get it right. Persistence is key.

Take all prescribed medicine as directed, and always complete the prescription, even if you feel better before all the medicine is gone.

Smoking can make sinusitis worse. If you smoke, talk with your care provider about ways to successfully reduce or quit smoking.



### Helpful tools and resources

#### **Find resources and services in your community:**

211 helps Albertans find the right resource or service for whatever issue they need help with, at the right time. 211 is available anytime, day or night, by phone, text, and online chat. It is confidential and available in over 170 languages over the phone. To contact 211:

- Call 211
- Text INFO to 211
- Visit [ab.211.ca](http://ab.211.ca)

Workshops, classes, and services from the **Alberta Healthy Living Program** can help you to improve your health and quality of life with a chronic condition: [ahs.ca/ahlp](http://ahs.ca/ahlp)

**Chronic Disease Management support:** [ahs.ca/cdm](http://ahs.ca/cdm)

## Resources

There's lots of information out there, and it can be confusing to know what information is accurate and true. Here are some great resources that may be helpful for you.

Consider links to resources that help patients learn:

- Nasal Decongestants: [How to use \(MyHealth.Alberta.ca\)](#)
- Saline Nasal Washes for Sinusitis: [\[Video\] \(MyHealth.Alberta.ca\)](#)

### Get help now:

- Emergency: Call 911
- [Health Link](#): Call 811

### Mental health, addiction, and crisis support:

- [Addiction Helpline](#): 1-866-332-2322
- [Mental Health Helpline](#): 1-877-303-2642
- Crisis Text Line: Text CONNECT to 741741
- Crisis Services Canada: call 988, or visit [talksuicide.ca](#)

### Community and social supports:

- Alberta 211: call 211, or visit [ab.211.ca](#)
- Family Violence Info Line: 310-1818, or visit [alberta.ca/family-violence-find-supports.aspx](#)
- Income Support: 1-866-644-5135, or visit [alberta.ca/income-support.aspx](#)

### Alberta Health Services programs:

- Home Care: [ahs.ca/homecare](#)
- Find a Dietitian: [ahs.ca/nutrition](#)
- Spiritual Care Services: [ahs.ca/spiritualcare](#)

### Primary care (family doctors):

- Find a doctor: [ahs.ca/findadoctor](#)
- Virtual care guide: [ahs.ca/virtualhealth](#)

### Patient concerns and feedback:

- Office of Alberta Health Advocates: [alberta.ca/office-of-alberta-health-advocates.aspx](#)
- Alberta Health Services Patient Relations: 1-855-550-2555, or visit [ahs.ca/patientfeedback](#)

### Helpful tip

If you can't print this resource at home, ask a family member, friend, or your healthcare provider to print it for you. You can also use a computer and printer at your local library.

## Important phone numbers

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

Name or clinic name:

Phone number:

## Notes

Use this space to take notes.

### About this Pathway

The AHS Provincial Pathways Unit co-developed this patient pathway in partnership with patient and family advisors, primary healthcare providers, and otolaryngology specialists. **It is current as of June 2024.**

### Authors & Conflict of Interest Declaration

This pathway was reviewed and revised by a multi-disciplinary co-design team including otolaryngology specialists and primary care providers, and patient and family advisors from across Alberta, available upon request.

### Pathway Review Process

Patient pathways undergo scheduled review every two years, or earlier if there is a clinically notable change in knowledge or practice. The next scheduled update for this pathway is June 2026. However, we welcome feedback at any time. Please email comments to [albertapathways@ahs.ca](mailto:albertapathways@ahs.ca).

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### Disclaimer

This pathway represents evidence-based best practice but does not override the individual responsibility of healthcare professionals to make decisions appropriate to their patients using their own clinical judgment given their patients' specific clinical conditions, in consultation with patients/alternate decision makers. The pathway is not a substitute for clinical judgment or advice of a qualified healthcare professional. It is expected that all users will seek advice of other appropriately qualified and regulated healthcare providers with any issues transcending their specific knowledge, scope of regulated practice or professional competence.

### References

[1] American Family Physician, "Nasal sprays: How to use them correctly," 15 December 2000. [Online]. Available: [www.aafp.org/pubs/afp/issues/2000/1215/p2695.html](http://www.aafp.org/pubs/afp/issues/2000/1215/p2695.html).