



KARYN SHANKS MD

Heart, Hope, Healing

Nutrition for Your Nose: Treating Sinus Infections with....Kimchi??

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Ever had a sinus infection? If so, you recognize that familiar, dreaded sensation that your face is on fire. It seems to be a special kind of torture, leaving me wondering each time what I have done to deserve this pain. (If you haven't had a sinus infection, I hope you never get one!) Sinus infections can be a major, recurring problem for some people, and they aren't always easy to cure. In part because their causes are not well understood, it has been difficult for conventional medicine to determine the best treatments for sinus infections. This story is my journey toward finding a cure for my own sinus problems.

My Sinus Infections

After the birth of my second child, a pregnancy which was complicated by a frightening bout of pneumonia and multiple rounds of antibiotics, I started to get sinus infections. Every time I got a cold it would inevitably turn into a sinus infection. Every. Time. At first, I tried just

ignoring them, which was the most convenient thing to do. I had two children under age 2 and was a full-time graduate student. Why would I want to wait around at the doctor's office? (Current medical advice actually encourages this approach, stating that 70% of sinus infections go away on their own within 2 weeks without treatment.)

This did not work for me. After four weeks, my symptoms not only weren't gone, but were much worse. Reluctantly, I finally trundled off to the doctor for antibiotics. As the years went on, I continued to get sinus infections after every cold, but they became more sinister. Instead of being something I could live with for weeks, they came on with such ferocity and intensity that within hours I was feverish and in so much pain I couldn't sleep or eat.

Antibiotics-the unintended consequences

Antibiotics, lifesavers in some circumstances, have the unintended consequence of killing off good bugs in our microbiome. (The microbiome is the community of trillions of microbes and their genes that inhabit our bodies-especially our intestines). And the health of the microbiome affects every cell in the body. As I started to learn about functional medicine and the microbiome I became determined to cure my frequent sinus infections without antibiotics. You name it, I tried it. Neti pots, essential oils, probiotics, probiotics IN neti pots, vast quantities of raw garlic that made my stomach ache...none of it helped. I still ended up on antibiotics every time.

After a particularly nasty sinus infection early in 2015, I found the blog LactoBacto.com. The author of the blog, Mara Silgailis, had been experimenting for several years with using kimchi juice to treat recurring sinus infections. Let me be clear-not eating the kimchi, but dabbing kimchi juice UP HER NOSE. And it worked for her. I got a chance to try it myself a few weeks later after a cold left me with the familiar face-on-fire sensation in my sinuses. Praise be, it worked. And it worked again two months later while I was traveling and thankfully found kimchi at the local store. Since then I have stopped several more sinus infections in the same way. I have not had to take antibiotics for a sinus infection for two years now.

Lest you quickly decide this is just too weird to be true (believe me, I initially thought so!), there is some science behind this approach. Many sinus infections are now thought to occur due to a lack of microbial diversity in the sinuses, rather than simply from an overgrowth of a specific pathogen. There seem to be one or more "keystone" species in the sinuses that direct the growth of other organisms, essentially deciding which ones can set up housekeeping there and which are kicked out. *Lactobacillus sakei* seems to be a keystone species in the sinuses. And during the fermentation process in making kimchi, one of the microbes that grows is *Lactobacillus sakei*. So adding this organism back to the sinuses (after multiple rounds of antibiotics have probably killed it off) makes sense.

How to use kimchi

There are detailed [instructions](#) on Mara's blog on how to use the kimchi juice, and I encourage you to read them if you want to try this yourself. I find that just dipping a cotton swab into the kimchi juice (fermented kimchi with live cultures, not canned) and swabbing the entire inside of my nostrils, then inhaling deeply through my nose for 5 or 6 breaths is the most useful. (You don't want to actually inhale the kimchi liquid-that would be bad for your lungs! You are just trying to get the bacteria to migrate into your sinuses.) I do this 4-6 times a day towards the end of a cold, when I am most likely to get a sinus infection. And I also have found that taking an oral anti-inflammatory to reduce swelling in my nose is helpful. I have used ibuprofen in the past, but will be trying curcumin and quercetin next time.

Immune system health is important

Obviously other factors impact whether we get sinus infections and even how often we catch colds. One of the most important is what we eat and our nutritional status. Every person has unique nutritional needs. When you meet those needs, your immune system and overall health can really improve. I have found that eating a nutrient-dense diet and taking a few supplements carefully selected for my specific health issues is critically important for me to avoid colds and sinus infections. I love helping people optimize nutrition for good immune health-feel free to contact me if I can help you!

Hopefully in the future a nasal spray using not only *Lactobacillus sakei*, but other beneficial nasal probiotics will be available. Until then, I will make sure I know which stores carry fermented kimchi!

References

LactoBacto blog by Mara Silgailis <http://lactobacto.com/tag/lactobacillus-sakei/>

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Karyn Shanks, MD, is a physician who lives and practices in Iowa City. Her work is inspired by the science of Functional Medicine, body-mind principles, and wisdom gleaned from the transformational journeys of thousands of clients over her twenty-five-year career. Her work honors each individual and the power of their stories, their inner wisdom, and innate healing potential. She believes that the bones of healing are in what we do for ourselves. She is the author of *Liftoff*, a manual of energy recovery and healing through essential self-care practices.

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