

Fungus causes most chronic sinusitis, researchers say

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From Medical Correspondent Dr. Steve Salvatore (CNN) -- Fungus may be the cause of almost all cases of the most frequently reported chronic disease in the United States, sinusitis, instead of only a few as previously thought.

And that may be the reason millions of sinus sufferers do not find relief from antibiotics and nasal sprays, according to Mayo Clinic researchers.

"We were able to find fungus which was never thought to be there in almost every case of chronic sinusitis," said Mayo Clinic's Dr. Jens Poinkau.

Sinusitis is an inflammation of the membranes of the nose and sinuses. Nearly 37 million Americans suffer from it. Sinusitis commonly causes chronic headaches, runny nose, nasal congestion and a diminished sense of smell and taste.

Fungus and mold spores are present in the air and are breathed in all the time. The Mayo Clinic research team looked at 210 patients with sinusitis and discovered more than 40 different kinds of fungi in their nasal passages.

"The amazing thing is that also the inflammation which leads to chronic sinusitis was there in a reaction to the fungus," said Poinkau.

Jordan Josephson, an ear, nose and throat specialist in New York, said he was not surprised by the findings.

It was previously known that fungus caused some cases of sinusitis, he said. "The problem is that until recently, when technology improved in our laboratory, we weren't able to culture out the fungus. So now we get better fungal cultures, and we're now getting fungus on more and more of our patients," Josephson said.

Now that the fungus problem has been identified, researchers hope to develop better treatments to fight it and to control the body's sensitivity to it.

"The problem is that patients are sensitive to the fungus. And until we find something to change the DNA of that person, or the genetics of that person, change their sensitivity to the fungus, they are always going to be sensitive to that fungus," said Josephson.

While research into chronic sinusitis continues, pharmaceutical companies are setting up clinical trials to test medications to control the fungus. They estimate it will be two years before any treatments are available.