

Preventing and Treating Ear Infections



Is your child's ear hurting? It could be an ear infection. Children are more likely than adults to get ear infections. Talk to your child's doctor about the best treatment.

Some ear infections, such as middle ear infections, need antibiotic treatment, but many can get better on their own without antibiotics.

What is an ear infection?

There are different types of ear infections. **Middle ear infection** (acute otitis media) is an infection in the middle ear.

Another condition that affects the middle ear is called **otitis media with effusion**. It occurs when fluid builds up in the middle ear without being infected and without causing fever, ear pain, or pus buildup in the middle ear.

When the outer ear canal is infected, the condition is called "swimmer's ear," which is different from a middle ear infection.

Causes

Middle ear infections can be caused by:

- Bacteria, like *Streptococcus pneumoniae* and *Haemophilus influenzae* (nontypeable) —the two most common bacterial causes
- Viruses, like those that cause colds or flu

Symptoms

Common symptoms of middle ear infection in children can include:

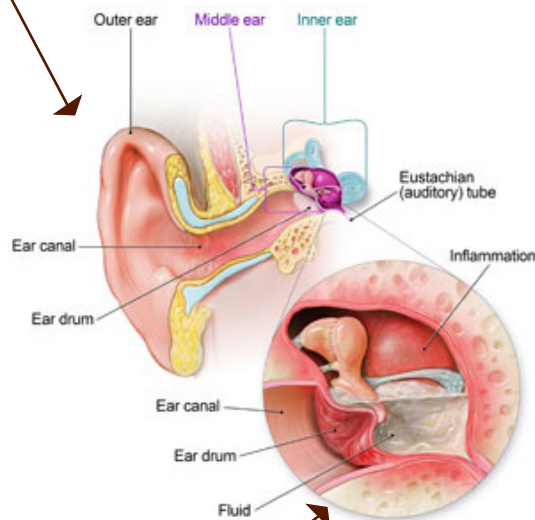
- Ear pain
- Fever
- Fussiness or irritability
- Rubbing or tugging at an ear
- Difficulty sleeping

When to Seek Medical Care

See a doctor if your child has:

- A fever of 102.2°F (39°C) or higher
- Pus, discharge, or fluid coming from the ear
- Worsening symptoms
- Symptoms of a middle ear infection that last for more than 2–3 days
- Hearing loss

Healthy ear



Infection of middle ear

See a doctor right away if your child is younger than 3 months old and has a fever greater than 100.4 °F (38 °C).



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Treatment

A doctor will determine what type of illness your child has by asking about symptoms and doing a physical examination. Your doctor can make the diagnosis of a middle ear infection by looking inside your child's ear to examine the eardrum and see if there is pus in the middle ear.

Antibiotics are often not needed for middle ear infections because the body's immune system can fight off the infection on its own. But sometimes antibiotics, such as amoxicillin, are needed to treat infants, severe cases, or cases that last longer than 2–3 days.

For mild cases of middle ear infection, your doctor might recommend **watchful waiting** or **delayed antibiotic prescribing**.

- **Watchful waiting:** Your child's doctor may suggest watching and waiting to see if your child needs antibiotics. This gives the immune system time to fight off the infection. If your child doesn't feel better after 2–3 days of rest, extra fluids, and pain relievers, the doctor will write a prescription for an antibiotic.
- **Delayed prescribing:** Your child's doctor may give an antibiotic prescription but will suggest that you wait 2–3 days to see if your child is still sick before filling it.

How to Feel Better

Some ways to feel better—whether or not antibiotics are needed for an ear infection:

- Rest.
- Drink extra water or other fluids.
- Take acetaminophen or ibuprofen to relieve pain or fever. Ask your doctor or pharmacist what medications are safe for your child to take and what dose to give your child.



Over-the-Counter Medicine and Children

Be careful about giving over-the-counter medicines to children. **Not all over-the-counter medicines are recommended for children of certain ages.**

- Pain relievers:
 - Children younger than 6 months: only give acetaminophen.
 - Children 6 months or older: it is OK to give acetaminophen or ibuprofen.
 - Never give aspirin to children because it can cause Reye's syndrome, a rare but very serious illness that harms the liver and brain.

Be sure to ask your doctor or pharmacist about the right dosage of over-the-counter medicines for your child's age and size. Also, tell your child's doctor and pharmacist about all the prescription and over-the-counter medicines they are taking.



Prevention

You can help prevent ear infections by doing your best to stay healthy and keep others healthy.

- Make sure your child is up to date on vaccinations and gets a flu vaccine every year. The pneumococcal vaccine protects against *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, a common cause of middle ear infections.
- Clean your hands.
- Breastfeed exclusively until your baby is 6 months old and continue to breastfeed for at least 12 months.
- Don't smoke and avoid exposure to secondhand smoke.



To learn more about antibiotic prescribing and use, visit www.cdc.gov/antibiotic-use.