



# Ear Infection (Otitis Media)

Ear infections are common in young children, are less common in older children and occasionally occur in adults.

## How does an ear infection occur?

The small space behind the ear drum is normally filled with air. This air space is connected to the back of the nose by a tiny channel, the Eustachian tube. Typically, when ear infections occur the middle ear space becomes filled with fluid (mucus) which becomes infected by bacteria or viruses (germs). Ear infections often follow colds when there is a lot of mucus around the nose and throat but they sometimes occur 'out of the blue'.

## What are the symptoms of an ear infection?

*Earache* - is the common symptom. However, many earaches are not due to ear infections. A common cause of mild earache is due to a build up mucus in the ear after a cold. This usually clears in a few days. If a child has earache but is otherwise not ill, an ear infection is unlikely. Painkillers should be given such as paracetamol (Calpol, Disprol, etc). Often the pain will go. Sometimes pain felt in the ear is due to other causes such as teeth problems. However, an earache that becomes worse over 12-24 hrs in a child who becomes feverish and unwell is often due to an ear infection.

As well as earache, there may be a temporary decrease in hearing. Children may have a high temperature, sometimes vomit and generally feel ill. Young babies cannot point to their pain and one of the causes of a hot, irritable, crying baby is an ear infection. Sometimes the ear drum perforates (bursts). This lets out infected mucus and the ear becomes runny for a few days. As the pain is due to a tense eardrum, a burst eardrum often relieves the pain. If the ear drum does perforate it usually heals quickly after the infection clears.

## What are the treatments for an ear infection?

- ◆ *Painkillers* should be given regularly. For example, paracetamol (Calpol, Disprol, etc). If antibiotics are prescribed, the painkiller should still be given in addition until the pain eases.
- ◆ *Antibiotics* may be prescribed if an ear infection is getting worse. However, if antibiotics are not taken, there is a good chance of the infection clearing on its own as the body's immune system fights it off. If the infection is mild, some doctors advise a 'wait and see' approach as many ear infections clear without the need for antibiotics.

## Are there any complications from ear infections?

Some mucus often remains behind the eardrum after the infection is over. This usually clears within a week or so and hearing then returns to normal. Sometimes the mucus does not clear properly. Hearing may remain dulled. Consult a doctor if there is a hearing problem that persists after an ear infection has gone.