

Ear Infection (Otitis Media)

Ear infection is common in children, but can occur at any age. The main symptoms are earache and feeling unwell. Painkillers are the main treatment. Antibiotics are not usually needed but are prescribed in some cases. The infection usually clears within a few days.

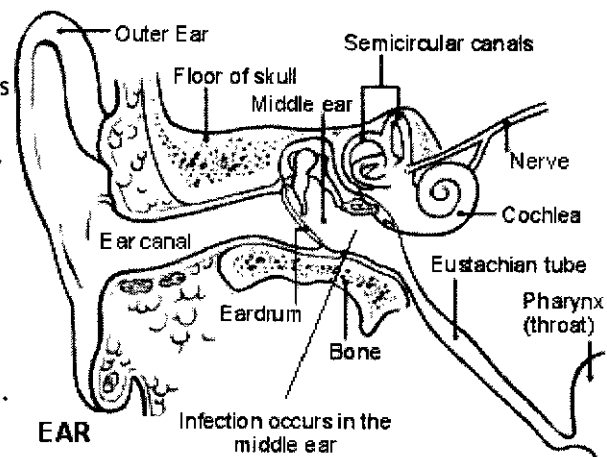
What is an ear infection?

An ear infection means that the middle ear is infected. The middle ear is the eardrum and the small space behind the eardrum. An ear infection is sometimes called 'acute otitis media'. See separate leaflet called '*Otitis Externa*' which deals with infection of the ear canal.

How does an ear infection occur?

The small space behind the eardrum in the middle ear is normally filled with air. It is connected to the back of the throat by a tiny channel called the Eustachian tube.

The middle ear space sometimes becomes filled with mucus (fluid), often during a cold. The mucus may then become infected by bacteria or viruses. Children with glue ear who have mucus behind their eardrum are more prone to ear infections. Sometimes an ear infection occurs 'out of the blue' for no apparent reason.



What are the symptoms of an ear infection?

- Earache is common, but does not always occur.
- Dull hearing may develop for a few days.
- Fever (high temperature) is common.
- Children may feel sick or vomit, and can be generally unwell.
- Young babies cannot point to their pain. One of the causes of a hot, irritable, crying baby is an ear infection.
- Sometimes the eardrum perforates (bursts). This lets out infected mucus and the ear becomes runny for a few days. As the pain of earache is due to a tense eardrum, a burst eardrum often relieves the pain. A perforated eardrum usually heals within a few weeks after the infection clears.

A note about earache

Earache is a common symptom of ear infection. However, not all earaches are caused by an ear infection. If a child has earache but is otherwise well, an ear infection is unlikely. A common cause of mild earache is a build up mucus in the middle ear after a cold. This usually clears in a few days. Sometimes pain that you can feel in the ear is due to 'referred pain' from other causes such as teeth problems.

What is the treatment for an ear infection?

Most bouts of ear infection will clear on their own without treatment within 2-3 days. The immune system can usually clear bacteria or viruses that cause ear infections. However, treatments that may be advised include the following:

Painkillers

If the ear infection is causing pain, then give painkillers to children regularly until the pain eases. For example, paracetamol (Calpol, Disprol, etc) or ibuprofen. These drugs will also lower a raised temperature which can make a child feel better. If antibiotics are prescribed (see below), you should still give the painkiller as well until the pain eases.

Recent research studies have found that a few drops of a local anaesthetic drug (lignocaine) placed into the ear may help to ease pain. Further studies are needed to clarify the use of this treatment. However, it seems logical, and may become more widely used over time, especially in children with severe ear pain.

number of ear infections that occur. See separate leaflet called '*Glue Ear - Grommets and Other Operations*' for more detail.

References

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