

Ear Infection Facts

What It Is

Most children will have at least one ear infection by the time they're 3 years of age. In fact, acute otitis media -- middle-ear infections -- account for some 24.5 million visits to the paediatrician each year. Ear infections are the second most common childhood illness, surpassed only by the common cold, says Sylvan E. Stool, MD, FAAP, a paediatric ear, nose, and throat specialist at Children's Hospital, in Denver. Here are answers to some commonly asked questions about this frequent ailment.

Why does my child get ear infections?

Young children are prone to ear infections for several reasons. For one thing, their immune systems are still developing, making them more susceptible to colds and other viral infections. Also, a child's Eustachian tube -- the duct that connects the middle ear to the back of the throat -- is short and positioned somewhat horizontally, making it easy for bacteria to pass from the throat to the ears.

When children are sick with a cold, their Eustachian tubes become blocked, and the middle-ear space between the eardrum and the Eustachian tube fills up with fluid. This fluid can put painful pressure on the eardrum and become a breeding ground for bacteria.

How do I know if my child has an ear infection?

It's reasonable to suspect that your child has an ear infection if she complains of persistent pain or pressure in her ears and develops a fever of 100 degrees to 104 degrees, particularly if she's had a recent case of the sniffles.

Ear pain will be most noticeable during meals, when swallowing may be painful, or at night when lying down increases pressure on the eardrum. Other symptoms include fussiness, difficulty hearing, pulling on their ears, loss of appetite, and yellow, white, or blood-tinged fluid draining from the ears.



What kind of treatment will my child's paediatrician recommend?

If your paediatrician determines that your child has an ear infection, she will most likely prescribe a 10-day course of antibiotics. Once your child begins the antibiotics, symptoms such as ear pain and fever should go away within 24 to 48 hours. Some paediatricians are taking a more conservative approach and adopting a wait-and-see attitude before prescribing antibiotics to children who exhibit only mild symptoms. In many cases, a mild ear infection will clear up on its own.

Is there something I can do to relieve the pain?

You can ease your child's discomfort with a non-aspirin pain reliever. Your paediatrician can advise you on the proper dosage for your child. Cold medicines, such as decongestants and antihistamines, are not effective in treating ear infections. Non-medicinal treatments include placing warm compresses or a heating pad, set on low, against your child's ear. You can also keep your child sitting up as much as possible to relieve pressure on her eardrum, and give older children an extra pillow at night.