



Ear Infections

Ear infections, also known as otitis media, are one of the most common childhood conditions. Three out of four children in the US will have at least one ear infection by the time they reach the age of 3, according to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders.

The ear is made up of three different parts - the outer ear, middle ear and inner ear. Although infections can occur in any area, the middle ear is most susceptible. The middle ear is the area just behind the eardrum and connects to the nose through tiny passages called eustachian tubes. When fluid, often from a cold or other viral infection, builds up in these tubes, they become inflamed or irritated. Children's eustachian tubes are narrower and shorter than those of adults and are therefore more likely to develop ear infections. Ear infections rarely affect adults.

Certain risk factors place children at a higher risk for ear infections. Some of these factors include:

- Age (between 6 and 18 months)
- Group child care
- Feeding position
- Family history
- Race

Ear infections can be hard to detect in young children due to a lack of communication. Symptoms of a middle ear infection typically include:

- Earache
- Fever
- Ear discharge
- Headache
- Dizziness

Your child may tug or pull at their ears, be irritable, cry often or have trouble sleeping if they are suffering from an ear infection. These symptoms often present themselves after a cold.

An ear infection can be diagnosed by using an otoscope, a small lighted tube used to view the eardrum, as well as performing a complete physical examination of the throat, sinuses, head, neck and lungs. A hearing test may also be performed for chronic or recurring ear infections.

Most ear infections go away on their own within two or three days. Therefore, treatment focuses on relieving pain and other symptoms. Ear infections may not be responsive to antibiotics if they are caused by a viral infection and will not relieve pain within the first 24 hours. Most doctors follow a wait-and-see approach for treating ear infections. More severe cases may require surgery or drainage tubes. Your doctor will help you decide which treatment option is best for your child.

You can help reduce your child's risk of ear infections by keeping them away from other sick children and secondhand smoke, breastfeeding and maintaining proper hygiene to prevent infection.