

Childhood Ear Infections

Nearly every child will have at least one ear infection.

Ear infections are the second most common illness in children.

What is an ear infection?

Children's ear infections are formally known as **otitis media**. Fluid and/or infection can collect in the middle ear (space behind the eardrum) and may cause hearing difficulty. Signs and symptoms of an ear infection may include the following: pain, fever, fussiness, tugging on the ears, discharge or blood coming from the ears. Some children may not show any signs at all.

Why do children get ear infections?

If the eustachian tube that connects the middle ear to the back of the throat does not open properly, fluid can build up behind the eardrum. Bacteria or viruses can move into this fluid and cause an infection. As children get older, the size and position of the eustachian tube changes, and they usually get fewer ear infections. While it may be hard to determine the reason for a child's ear infection, the following increase the risk:

- family history of ear infections
- contact with sick children
- head and neck abnormalities such as cleft palate
- smoking in the home
- allergies
- asthma
- cold and flu season
- bottle feeding while the baby is on their back

Why should you be concerned about ear infections?

Ear infections can cause temporary hearing difficulties. Children with ear infections may hear sounds as muffled or unclear. Ear infections may also contribute to poor development of listening skills, as well as difficulties with speech, language, learning, attention and behavior. Ignoring ear infections may result in serious medical and/or hearing problems.

Who may be involved in your child's care?

Physician: A physician may examine your child with a special light called an otoscope to look for fluid or infection behind the eardrum. The physician may or may not prescribe medication. If the infection and hearing difficulty continue, the physician may refer your child to other specialists. The physician may also recommend long-term use of antibiotics or further medical intervention. Despite treatment, ear infections may reoccur.

Otolaryngologist (Ear, Nose and Throat Specialist or ENT): An ENT specializes in treating medical problems of the ear, nose, and throat. The ENT may recommend insertion of ventilation tubes in your child's eardrums.

Audiologist: An audiologist specializes in the identification and management of hearing problems. They may help determine if fluid and/or infection is present in your child's middle ears and if there are related hearing difficulties. The audiologist can also offer listening and learning strategies to help your child. It is important to have your child's hearing retested in three to four months to monitor middle ear function, or after ventilating tubes have been inserted.



What can you do to help your child?

Watch for signs of ear infection:

- Fever or discomfort, such as pulling on the ears.
- Your child does not startle or try to look for noises.
- Your child asks “what” or “huh” frequently.
- Your child moves closer to or turns up the volume of the television.
- Your child watches facial expressions and gestures.



Understand your child’s treatment:

- Ask the physician to explain anything you don’t understand about your child’s treatment.
- If the physician prescribes medication, make sure you know how to give it to our child and be sure to give your child all of the medication.
- Ask the physician what you can do to relieve your child’s ear pain at home.
- Ask the physician when you should bring your child back for an ear check.

Encourage your child’s speech and language:



- Children often imitate what they hear. Talk about everything your child does during the day and expand on your child’s language (e.g., if your child says “dog”, you could say “brown dog” or “that’s a nice brown dog”).
- Repeat your child’s words using adult pronunciation.
- Read to your child.
- Move close to your child and speak clearly.
- Build vocabulary. Use new words while shopping, bathing, eating, taking a walk, etc.

For more information on how to encourage your child’s speech and language please view the following ACSLPA information sheets:

- [Preschool Speech Language Development – Birth to 5 Years](#)
- [Speech and Language Development – Early School Years](#)
- [Developing Reading and Writing Skills](#)

April 2014
Revised July 2018

Getting Help

If you suspect a problem, consult a Registered Audiologist (R.Aud). To find a practitioner:

- Contact HEALTH LINK - Health Advice 24/7 at 8-1-1 or visit: www.MyHealth.Alberta.ca
- Enquire at a Public Health Centre or your child’s school.
- Find a private practice audiologist:
 - Search ‘Audiologist’ in the Yellow Pages.



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