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Ear Infections—Symptoms and Treatment

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Otitis media is the medical name for the inflammation and/or infection of the middle ear. The middle ear is the space behind the eardrum that is filled with air. Sometimes the middle ear cavity becomes filled with fluid. This may be due to an infection such as a cold, a blocked Eustachian tube (tube that connects that back of the throat to the middle ear for air pressure equalization), or enlarged adenoids (masses of lymphoid tissue).

When fluid is in the middle ear, the individual may experience a “stiffness” or temporary loss of some hearing, pain/pressure (because fluid is pushing on the eardrum), fluid draining from the ear(s), and fever. Dizziness may occur as well because balance and coordination functions are located in the aural (ear) system.

Ear infections are common in young children, although adults can get them too. “Seventy five percent of children experience at least one episode of otitis media by their third birthday. Almost half of these children will have three or more ear infections during their first 3 years”. You may notice that children pull at their ears, cry in pain, or don’t seem to hear your voice as well when they have an ear infection.



How Can I Help Prevent Ear Infections?

There are several ways you can help prevent ear infections.

- Have the child avoid contact with sick playmates. (Ear infections are common in group settings such as a day-care center.)
- Do not smoke around the child.
- Try not to bottle-feed an infant while he/she is lying down.
- Breast-feed.
- Try to keep water out of the ears.



Why Is It Important to Get Treatment for Ear Infections?

There are several reasons to get treatment for ear infections other than physical discomfort.

- The infection can travel, even to the brain.
- Permanent hearing loss may occur if the inflammation and/or infection does not receive treatment.
- The child may miss out on hearing sounds and words during critical periods of speech and language development, which can result in speech/language deficits.

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What Are Some Treatment Options?

If the fluid in the middle ear is infected, a doctor may prescribe an antibiotic. A pain reliever may be prescribed as well. The fluid may remain in the ear for several months. If a child experiences frequent fluid and hearing loss, he/she may need to get a small PE (pressure-equalization) tube put in the eardrum to keep the air pressure equalized and allow sound to travel freely through the middle ear cavity. In some cases, the doctor will remove the adenoids. Keeping water out of the ears is also important.



Resources:

National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (2002). Otitis media (ear infection), NIH Pub. No. 97-4216. Retrieved April 29, 2009, from <http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/hearing/otitism.asp>

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