

# Ear Infection

This fact sheet helps you to know what's 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you or your child develops an ear infection. It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek medical advice from a health professional.

## Useful facts

### How common are ear infections?

Three quarters of children will have had 1-6 ear infections by the age of 2, most commonly between 3-18 months. They occur in the newborn and in older children but are less common after the age of 3.

### What causes ear infections?

A respiratory infection such as a cold or sore throat can block the tube

(the Eustachian tube) draining the space (the middle ear) behind the ear drum. Children's tubes are narrower so block more easily. Fluid builds up causing pain and deafness as the eardrum is prevented from moving. If the fluid gets infected, the pain is severe and the ear drum can sometimes rupture leading to a discharge.

## What can I expect to happen?

### How long are my symptoms likely to last?

The pain of an ear infections usually last up to 4 days and this period is not reduced by antibiotics. By then the symptoms should be improving. Deafness can last a few days longer until fluid clears.

### When are antibiotics recommended?

Antibiotics are rarely used. NICE\* recommends antibiotics only when the ear is discharging or for a child under 2 with an infection in both ears.

### Delayed prescription

Most ear infections cannot be prevented and will clear by themselves over a day or two.

If it is thought antibiotics *might* be required, you may be given a 'delayed' prescription and encouraged to wait a day or two to see if symptoms improve (they usually do).

## What can I do myself to get me or my child better – now and in the future?

### Pain killers

Painkillers are the most important treatment of all. Use paracetamol and ibuprofen but take careful note of the doses for specific ages given on the container, particularly with a young child.

### Home remedy

Some people will find applying a warm flannel to the ear helps.

### Encourage rest

Resting may help the body fight the infection.

### Stop smoking

Children in smoke free houses suffer from fewer ear infections.

**Breast fed** children have fewer ear infections.

### Use of dummy

Although using a dummy increases the likelihood of ear infections, it may decrease the likelihood of cot death if used as the child is going off to sleep.

## When should I seek medical help?

### Warning symptoms and signs include:

#### High fever

NICE\* recommends that you call a professional urgently for any child under 3 months with a temperature of 38 degrees or over or aged between 3-6 months with a temperature of 39 degrees or more. If your child has a temperature for over 5 days you should also contact a professional.

#### Signs of severe illness

Severely unwell or still not improving after 2-3 days  
New discharge or swelling around the ear  
Vomiting  
Dizziness  
Floppiness, drowsiness, or irritability

**Where can I find out more?** Check out the NHS Choices website (<http://www.patient.co.uk/health/ear-infection-otitis-media>) for further advice. Remember that your pharmacist can also help you with assessing your symptoms.

\*NICE = National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence