

Ear Infections

An ear infection (acute otitis media) occurs when fluid builds up in the **middle ear**. Ear infections often happen during a viral infection (like the common cold).

Ear infections are common, especially in children. In fact, 3 out of every 4 children have at least one ear infection by the time they're 3 years old. Ear infections are annoying and often painful — but they're usually not serious.

How do I know it's an ear infection?

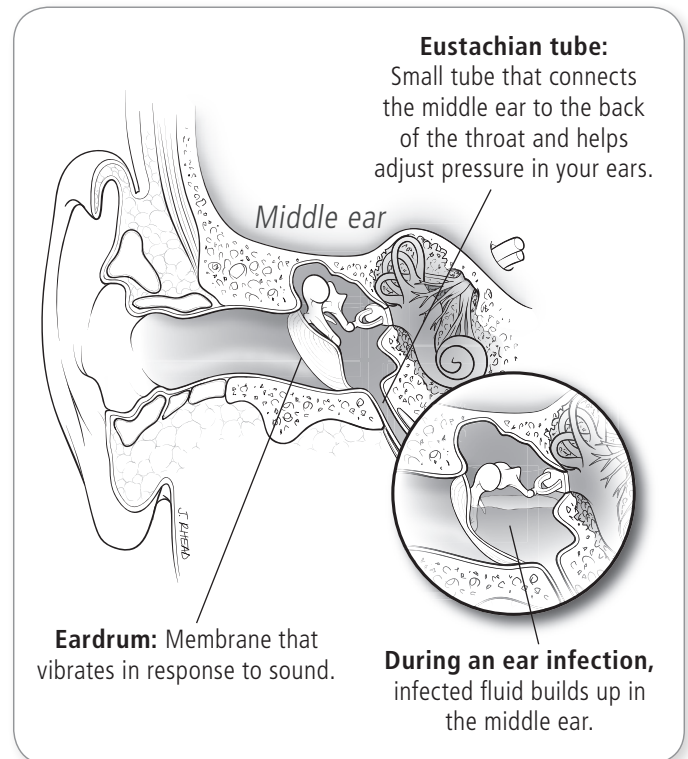
Although only a doctor can tell for sure if it's an ear infection, the list below can help you know when to seek medical care.

Symptoms of an ear infection	Not symptoms of an ear infection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ear pain • Crying more than you'd expect with a cold • Fever • Poor sleeping • Fluid coming out of the ear • Pulling on the ear (new or often) and your child seems sick • Temporary hearing loss 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tugging on the ear without other signs of sickness • Diarrhea • Drooling

Are ear infections dangerous?

Ear infections usually don't cause serious problems. If there is too much pressure on the eardrum, it may burst, causing a sharp pain and fluid discharge. This is nature's way of relieving the pressure and pain of an ear infection. Ruptured eardrums are usually not dangerous, and most heal on their own. If you suspect that your child's eardrum has ruptured, call your doctor to discuss it.

Ear infections are not contagious. Your child can return to school or daycare as soon as he feels up to it.



How can I keep my child from getting ear infections?

- Wash your hands, and teach your child to wash his hands.
- Keep your child's immunizations up to date, and get a flu shot for you and your child every year.
- Look for a daycare with fewer than 6 kids per room.
- Keep your kids away from smoke. If you smoke, quit or keep your distance when you're smoking.
- Don't use a pacifier after age one.
- Have your baby sit up — not lie down — while taking a bottle or sippy cup.
- See a doctor if your child is always congested ("stuffy") or think he may have allergies.
- Breastfeed for at least the first 6 months of life.

How can I help my child feel better?

To ease your child's ear pain:

- **Oral pain medications.** You can give your child acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil), or naproxen (Aleve). Follow the package directions or your doctor's instructions. NEVER give a child aspirin.
- **Pain-relieving ear drops.** Ear drops prescribed by your doctor can also help.

Do **not** give your child cold and cough medications. They do not speed healing, and they can have dangerous side effects in children.

How is an ear infection diagnosed?

- **Symptom check.** The doctor will ask about your child's symptoms and behavior.
- **Exam.** The doctor will look into your child's ear using an otoscope — a lighted tool to look at the eardrum — to see if it is bulging and red.

How is an ear infection treated?

Treatment depends on your child's age, the type of infection, how long the infection has lasted, and other factors. Your doctor will recommend one of these options:

- **Watchful waiting.** Studies show that most ear infections heal on their own without antibiotics. For this reason, your doctor may suggest waiting 2 days to see if symptoms improve. Your doctor may give you a **SNAP (safety-net antibiotic prescription)** to fill if your child doesn't improve or gets worse within a few days. If so, follow your doctor's directions carefully.
- **Antibiotics.** The doctor may prescribe antibiotics, especially if your child is under 2 or has significant symptoms. Give your child the antibiotics as prescribed. Don't stop early because your child feels better! The infection may come back and be harder to treat.
- **Ear tubes.** If ear infections happen again and again or cause enough temporary hearing loss, your doctor may refer you to a specialist for ear tubes. These tiny tubes allow air into the middle ear while helping eliminate fluid.



When should I call the doctor?

Your child should begin to improve within 2 days of seeing the doctor, whether or not she is taking antibiotics. She may still have symptoms, but you should see some improvement each day. If your child isn't improving or is getting worse, start the SNAP or call the doctor.

Call your doctor right away if your child has severe symptoms (intense pain, fever over 103°, or swelling around the ear).

Why not start antibiotics right away?

Your doctor will not prescribe antibiotics if your child has a virus. **Antibiotics kill bacteria, not viruses**, and many ear infections are caused by viruses. **Using antibiotics when they're not needed can do more harm than good:**

- **Bacteria become resistant to antibiotics** — a serious worldwide problem. Common antibiotics may not kill resistant bacteria, so more toxic and costly antibiotics are needed.
- **You child could have allergies or side effects.** Side effects of antibiotics may include diarrhea, rashes, and allergic reactions.