

My Ear Hurts

Doctor word: Otitis media

Why does my ear hurt? Build up of fluid behind your ear drum can cause pressure and pain. Many times this fluid is created by your body to wash out an infecting virus from a previous cold. When the tube between your middle ear and throat gets blocked up, the fluid is trapped behind your ear drum. This type of ear infection is called "otitis media". Fluid can remain in the middle ear for months after a cold.

What causes ear infections or otitis media? Many things. These include cold viruses (most common), bacteria, smoking and allergies. You can have fever, pain, dizziness and ringing in the ears with these infections. Only bacterial infections are cured with antibiotics. Children are more likely to get ear infections than adults, but they don't always need antibiotics.

Do antibiotics help? Not usually. Ear infections are mostly caused by cold viruses which are not killed by antibiotics. Only take antibiotics if prescribed by your doctor and finish all the pills. Antibiotics can create stronger germs or be harmful if taken when not needed.

Antibiotics do NOT kill viruses!!

What can I do to get better? Rest and drinking plenty of fluids is the best way to get better quickly. Warm compresses against the lower ear or back of the jaw can help relieve some pain. Acetaminophen and ibuprofen can also help with pain, but remember to adjust for children's dosages. Decongestants may help, but do not use antihistamines.

Should I see a doctor? If you have an earache for longer than a day or it is causing severe pain, you should consult a doctor. Ear infections in young children can be serious and should always be evaluated by a doctor. Young children may show signs such as fever, irritability and pulling at or rubbing their ear.

Can I prevent getting ear infections? YES. Washing your hands is the easiest way to prevent the spread of ear infections. Cold viruses like to infect you when your body's immune system is weak. To keep your immune system healthy, eat right, exercise, get plenty of rest, stay hydrated and don't smoke. Smoking around children can make them more likely to get ear infections and develop more serious problems such as asthma. Also, infants should always be fed in an upright position, not lying down.



Infectious Disease Epidemiology

Adapted from Washington State Department of Health,
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