

Parent information sheet – ear infections in children

DISCLAIMER: THIS FACT SHEET IS FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY. PLEASE CONSULT WITH YOUR DOCTOR OR OTHER HEALTH PROFESSIONAL TO MAKE SURE THIS INFORMATION IS RIGHT FOR YOUR CHILD.

Ear infections are very common in small children. Most ear infections involve the middle ear. This is called 'otitis media'.

Cause

Babies and young children suffer more middle ear infections than older children because the tubes connecting the middle ear to the throat (the eustachian tubes) are shorter and more horizontal. This makes it easier for germs to reach the middle ear from the nose and throat. The eustachian tube is also softer in children and easily blocked. This often happens as part of a virus infection (such as a common cold) which can occur frequently in younger children. When the eustachian tube is blocked, fluid doesn't drain very well from the middle ear to the throat, and air doesn't get into the middle ear space as well as it should.

Symptoms

Middle ear infections often occur as part of a 'cold' (sometimes called an upper respiratory infection) with a runny nose and sore throat. Babies and toddlers may suffer intense ear pain and usually have a fever. There may also be vomiting, loss of appetite, decrease in energy and activity and some loss of hearing. In some cases pus will break through the eardrum and present as a discharge from the ear.

The child feels better when the ear discharges as the painful pressure is gone. The burst eardrum usually heals on its own.

Treatment

If your child is in pain give him/her a pain reliever such as paracetamol ('Panadol') 15mg/kg per dose or Ibuprofen ('Nurofen') 10mg/kg per dose.

If you think your child may have an ear infection see your doctor.

Many cases of middle ear infection in children clear up on their own, without antibiotics, over a few days. In some cases a short course of antibiotics may be prescribed, particularly if the child is very young or very unwell.

Antibiotics are not required every time the doctor notices a child has a red ear.

They may cause side effects. Ask your doctor if antibiotics are really necessary.

Recovery from an ear infection

Following an ear infection, children may have some fluid in the middle ear for a few weeks. You may notice your child has some trouble hearing during this time.

This fluid will usually clear up by itself over a couple of months. If you think the fluid might be persisting (eg child irritable or not hearing well) and these symptoms persist for longer than three months then you should consult your doctor.

Important points

- Ear infections are very common in young children.
- Antibiotics are not always required.
- There may be some fluid in the middle ear for a time after the middle ear infection. This is normal and usually clears up on its own.
- Parents should seek further medical advice if there is persisting ear pain, discharge from the ears, hearing loss or fever.