

Ear Infections-What you need to know to help your child

Ear infections can hurt your child.

Young children often get ear infections. Three out of every four children have at least one by the time they are 5 years old. Some children can get them repeatedly. A child may have several in less than a year.

Colds and allergies can lead to ear infections. The tube that connects the ear to the throat gets swollen. Then fluid builds up in the middle ear, instead of draining out into the throat. Once it is there, the fluid may get infected. The fluid can be a problem whether it is infected or not.

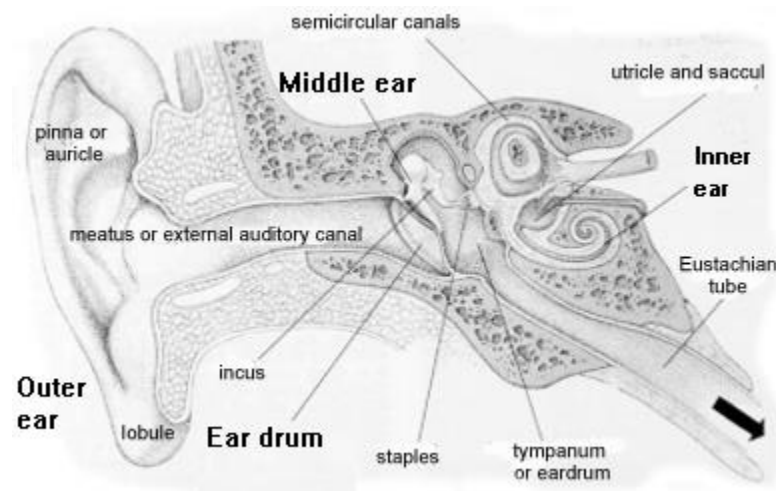
How can an ear infection hurt your child?

Fluid in the middle ear can keep your child from hearing well. The middle ear is supposed to stay dry.

Children whose ears are full of fluid may not hear what people say. They may have a hard time learning new words. They may not learn to speak clearly. They may not understand their teachers or do well in school.

How can you tell if there is fluid in the middle ear?

You can't tell if there is fluid in the middle ear just by looking at the outside of the ear. The middle ear is inside the head, behind the eardrum. You can't see inside the middle ear without using a special instrument.



But your child's behavior may give you some clues. If there is fluid in the middle ear and it is infected, the child may cry, act fussy, or tug at the ears. The child may also have other symptoms, such as fever, diarrhea, or a runny nose.

Sometimes, fluid is trapped in the ear but isn't infected. Then it's harder to tell that it's there. Even if your child feels fine, watch for signs that the child is not hearing well.

What should you do?

If you think there is fluid in the middle ear, take your child to a doctor or nurse. Doctors and nurses have a name for fluid in the middle ear. They call it *otitis media*. And they know how to treat it.

The doctor or nurse will use a special kind of light to look at the child's eardrum. The doctor, nurse, or audiologist may also test your child's hearing. An audiologist is specially trained to do the hearing test. The test does not hurt.

If there is fluid in the middle ear, the doctor will prescribe some medicine to help make the infection go away. The doctor may also suggest something to take away fever or pain.

Make sure all of the fluid goes away.

Be sure your child takes *all the* medicine that the doctor prescribes. The fever should go away in about two days, but the fluid may stay much longer. Your child may have trouble hearing for quite a while. So, don't skip any doses, even if your child feels better.

The doctor will probably want to see your child in about 10 days. This follow-up visit is important. Don't miss it. The doctor needs to be sure the infection is gone.

After the infection is gone, it may take four to six weeks for all the fluid to go away. When the middle ear is finally dry again, your child's hearing should be normal. Watch your child carefully for about four months to be sure that your child is hearing ok.

What if the fluid comes back?

If your child gets several ear infections in a year, the doctor may prescribe medicine for a longer time. The doctor may also refer your child to a special doctor, called an Otologist, *otolaryngologist*, or Ear, Nose, and Throat (ENT) doctor.

The special doctor may want to put a tiny hole and tube in each eardrum to help the middle ear stay dry. The tube allows fluid to drain out of the ear. This is a simple operation. Your child probably won't stay in the hospital overnight.

What about babies?

Babies and toddlers get more ear infections than older children. The tubes that connect their ears to their throats are so tiny that they swell shut very easily. By the time children are 4 to 6 years old, the tubes are larger and drain fluids better.

Remember, when a baby has fluid in the middle ear, the baby can't tell you what's wrong. You must pay attention. See how your baby reacts to soft, gentle noises.

Can you keep your child from getting ear infections?

Breastfeeding helps keep babies from getting ear infections. For more information on Breastfeeding please visit the Texas Department of State Health Services [Breast Milk Counts](#) website. If you bottle feed your baby, always hold the baby with the head higher than the chest and tummy. That way, the liquid will run down into the baby's throat, not into the middle ear. Never prop a bottle beside your baby in the crib.

Keep all children-especially babies-away from anyone who is smoking or who has a cold.

Remember, children can't tell if they hear well or not. They don't know how well other people hear, so they can't compare their hearing to anyone else's. It is up to you to watch for signs of hearing loss. Any time your child gets sick, ask a doctor or nurse to check for fluid in the ears.