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Ear Infections in Children

What is an ear infection?

An ear infection is a condition that can cause pain in the ear, fever, and trouble hearing. Ear infections are common in children. They often occur in children after they get a cold. Fluid can build up in the middle part of the ear behind the eardrum. This fluid can become infected and press on the eardrum, causing it to bulge. This causes symptoms. In some children, some fluid can stay in the ear for weeks to months after the pain and infection have gone away. This fluid can cause hearing loss that is usually mild and temporary. If the hearing loss lasts a long time, it can sometimes lead to problems with language and speech, especially in children who are at risk for problems with learning.

What are the symptoms of an ear infection?

In infants and young children, the symptoms include:

- Fever
- Pulling on the ear
- Being more fussy or less active than usual
- Having no appetite and not eating as much
- Vomiting or diarrhea

In older children, symptoms often include ear pain or temporary hearing loss.

How do I know if my child has an ear infection?

If you think your child has an ear infection, see your doctor. We should be able to tell if your child has an ear infection by asking about symptoms and/or doing an exam.

Is there anything I can do on my own to help my child feel better?

Yes. You can give your child medicine, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) to reduce the pain. But never give aspirin to a child younger than 18 years old. Aspirin can cause a dangerous condition called Reye syndrome. We do not recommend treating ear infections with cold and cough medicines. These medicines can have dangerous side effects in young children.

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How are ear infections treated?

Doctors can treat ear infections with antibiotics. These medicines kill the bacteria that cause some ear infections. But doctors do not always prescribe these medicines right away. That's because many ear infections are caused by viruses (not bacteria) and antibiotics do not kill viruses. Plus, many children get over ear infections without antibiotics.

We usually prescribe antibiotics to treat ear infections in infants younger than 2 years old. For children older than 2, we sometimes hold off on antibiotics.

We might suggest watching your child's symptoms for 1 or 2 days before trying antibiotics if your child is healthy in general and the pain and fever are not severe.

Whether or not your child needs antibiotics will depend on your child's age, health problems, and how many ear infections he or she has had in the past.

When should I follow up with the doctor?

You should call the doctor:

- After 1 to 2 days, if you are watching your child's symptoms. If the pain and fever have not gotten better, your doctor might prescribe antibiotics.
- After 2 days, if your child is taking antibiotics and his or her symptoms have not improved or are worse.

Can I reduce the number of ear infections my child gets?

Yes. If your child gets a lot of ear infections, we might suggest that your child get routine vaccines (that he or she might be missing) and talk with you about the risks and benefits of giving your child an antibiotic every day during certain months of the year or doing surgery to place a small tube in your child's eardrum