

# Otitis media (earache)

This advice is intended for parents/carers taking their child home after consulting a doctor. Your doctor may recommend different treatments depending on your child's condition.



The middle ear is the small space behind the eardrum; this space is usually filled with air. Otitis media is an infection of the middle ear that causes inflammation and a build-up of fluid. It is often extremely painful and may be associated with high fever.

## Symptoms of otitis media may include:

- Earache
- Fever
- Misery
- Pulling, tugging or rubbing ear
- Slight hearing loss

In most cases the symptoms of a middle ear infection develop quickly and resolve in a few days. In some cases, pus may run out of the ear. This is the fluid that had built up behind the ear drum causing a small hole in the eardrum; this tends to heal up by itself.

## Causes

Most cases of earache/otitis media in young children (under 5 years of age) are caused by viral infections; your child may also have a runny nose and cough. The Eustachian tube is a small tube that links the middle ear to the back of the throat. Its main job is to regulate air pressure in the ear. Its other function is to drain any fluid or mucus that builds up. The common 'cold' can cause the Eustachian to become blocked, causing a build-up of fluid or mucus and resulting in earache.

## Treatment

Most children with otitis media (earache) do not require treatment with antibiotics. Antibiotics rarely speed up recovery and often cause side effects such as rash and diarrhoea. They will also promote the development of antibiotic resistant bacteria in your child.

Antibiotics are usually only considered if your child:

- Is under 6 months of age and has otitis media
- Has pus draining from their ear
- Has a serious health condition that makes them more vulnerable to serious infection
- In addition, if your child has any features of severe infection (red or amber features as described below), they will need to be urgently assessed by a healthcare professional.

You can help relieve symptoms by:

- Giving your child paracetamol or ibuprofen to help relieve pain
- Encouraging your child to drink plenty of fluids




## Prevention

Is it not possible to prevent ear infections; however, you can do things that may reduce your child's chances of developing the condition:

Ensure your child is up-to-date with their immunisations

Avoid exposing your child to smoky environments (passive smoking)

## When should I get help?

 <p><b>RED</b></p>	<p><b>If your child has any of the following:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is going blue around the lips</li> <li>• Has pauses in their breathing or has an irregular breathing pattern</li> <li>• Too breathless to talk/eat or drink</li> <li>• Becomes pale, mottled and feels abnormally cold to touch</li> <li>• Has a fit/seizure</li> <li>• Becomes extremely agitated (crying inconsolably despite distraction), confused or very lethargic (difficult to wake)</li> <li>• Develops a rash that does not disappear with pressure (the 'Glass Test')</li> <li>• Is under 1 month of age with a temperature of 38°C / 100.4°F or above</li> </ul>	<p><b>If your child has any of the following:</b></p> <p>Go to the nearest Hospital Emergency Department or phone <b>999</b></p>
 <p><b>AMBER</b></p>	<p><b>If your child has any of the following:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has pus coming out of the ear</li> <li>• Develops swelling behind the ear or increasing pain / redness behind the ear</li> <li>• Develops dizziness or is losing their balance</li> <li>• Is becoming drowsy (excessively sleepy) or irritable (unable to settle down with toys, TV, food or picking up) - especially if they remain drowsy or irritable despite their fever coming down</li> <li>• Is complaining of a severe headache and neck stiffness/pain or discomfort with bright lights (photophobia)</li> <li>• Is having breathing problems, such as rapid breathing, shortness of breath or laboured breathing (drawing in of muscles below the lower ribs when they breath in)</li> <li>• Seems dehydrated (sunken eyes, drowsy or no urine passed for 12 hours)</li> <li>• Has extreme shivering or complains of muscle pain</li> <li>• Is between 1-3 months of age with a temperature of 38°C / 100°F or above; or 3-6 months of age with a temperature of 39°C / 102.2°F or above (but fever is common in babies up to 2 days after they receive vaccinations).</li> <li>• Continues to have a fever of 38.0°C or above for more than 5 days</li> <li>• Is getting worse or if you are worried</li> </ul>	<p><b>You need to contact a doctor or nurse today.</b></p> <p>Please ring your GP surgery or call NHS 111 - dial <b>111</b></p>
 <p><b>GREEN</b></p>	<p>If none of the features in the red or amber boxes above are present.</p>	<p><b>Self-care</b></p> <p>Continue providing your child's care at home. If you are still concerned about your child, contact your GP or call NHS 111 – dial <b>111</b></p>