

Ear Problems

Ear problems can involve the outer, middle or inner ear. They include infection, inflammation, damage from foreign bodies (small objects) and wax build up. A doctor can fully examine the ear using special instruments and diagnose the problem. Treatment is usually simple and effective.

Ear wax

Children and adults produce ear wax. This is normal and acts to protect the ear. The wax usually moves out of the ear along the ear canal. Movements such as chewing and talking help move the wax. A wax lump or plug can build up in the outer ear and is one of the most common reasons for a short-term loss of hearing.

Symptoms include:

- ear discomfort (e.g. itchiness)
- the ear feeling blocked or full
- noise in the ears (tinnitus)
- reduced hearing.

Treatment

Ear wax may need wax-softening ear drops to remove it from the ear.

(**Note:** some products contain oils from nuts). If ear drops do not move the wax, it may be removed with warm water or normal saline (salt water). This is called 'syringing'.

A doctor can also remove ear wax with a special instrument. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

Self care

- Ear wax will naturally leave the ear – as wax comes out of the ear canal, wipe it away with a soft cloth.
- Do not clean ear canal with hairpins, cotton buds, pencils or other objects – you may push the wax further down the canal, or damage the canal or ear drum.

Otitis externa

Otitis externa is inflammation or infection of the outer ear canal. The outer ear canal is the skin-lined canal (tube) which leads into the ear as far as the ear drum. Otitis externa is also called swimmer's ear or tropical ear because it is commonly caused by moisture in the ear.

Symptoms include:

- irritated, itchy ear
- ear pain – often made worse by movements such as chewing
- discharge from the ear (may be smelly)
- feeling of fullness in the ear
- reduced hearing.

Treatment

Talk to a doctor or pharmacist about otitis externa. Treatment may include:

- pain-relieving medicine (e.g. paracetamol, ibuprofen)
- careful cleaning and drying of the ear canal
- ear drops to relieve inflammation and clear infection.

Self care

To prevent otitis externa, keep your ear canals dry.

- Shake water from your ears after swimming and bathing.
- Use drying, antiseptic ear drops after swimming and bathing. Ask a pharmacist.
- Use waterproof ear plugs during swimming and bathing. Ask a pharmacist.

Foreign body

A foreign body in the outer ear canal can cause inflammation, damage and infection. Foreign bodies include small insects, cotton buds and things children may put in their ears (e.g. beads, food).

Symptoms include:

- ear pain
- discharge from the ear (may be smelly)
- reduced hearing
- noise if the object is an insect.

Treatment

It is best to see a doctor to have a foreign body removed.

Self care

Do not push anything into the ear canal to try to remove a foreign body.

Otitis media

Otitis media is inflammation or infection of the middle ear. The middle ear is the air-filled space right behind the ear drum. The air pressure in the middle ear is kept normal by the eustachian tube, which connects the middle ear to the back of the nose. When the nose is congested (e.g. during a common cold), fluid can build up in the eustachian tube and the middle ear, leading to increased pressure and infection in the middle ear. Otitis media is especially common in young children.

Symptoms include:

- ear pain
- reduced hearing
- discharge from the ear

- fever
- vomiting
- feeling irritable – infants may be unsettled, wake at night, rub their ears, have diarrhoea, lose their appetite.

Treatment

Talk to a doctor about otitis media. Treatment may include:

- pain-relieving medicine (e.g. paracetamol, ibuprofen)
- antibiotics, but they are not always needed. Otitis media often clears without antibiotics, but children should be reviewed again by a doctor if their symptoms have not improved after 24-48 hours.

Self care

- A warm pack or cold pack may help relieve ear pain.
- Avoid swimming with a congested (blocked) nose.
- Avoid deep diving, as water can be forced into the middle ear.
- Use of decongestant medicines may help prevent ear pain when flying soon after an ear infection. Ask a pharmacist.

Glue ear

Glue ear (also known as otitis media with effusion) is when fluid builds up behind the eardrum in the middle ear, but there is no ear infection. Some children who often get otitis media develop a glue ear. It occurs when fluid in the middle ear does not drain out properly.

Important

- Take a child with ear ache to a doctor as soon as possible.
- If you have recently had discharge from an ear or an ear infection, or have had a burst eardrum in the past, ask a doctor to check your eardrum before using ear drops.
- Seek medical advice if any of the following occurs with an ear problem:
 - pain lasting more than 24 hours
 - fever, dizziness, stiff neck
 - discharge from the ear
 - hearing loss or ringing in the ears
 - balance problems.

Symptoms include:

- ear pain
- reduced hearing
- behaviour problems due to reduced hearing.

Glue ear may lead to lasting ear damage and poor speech development.

Treatment

Talk to a doctor about glue ear. Treatment may include:

- antibiotics
- tiny drainage tubes (grommets) inserted through the ear drum.

Self care

Children with grommets should not get water in their ears. Water-proof ear plugs may help.

Inner ear problems

Problems in the inner ear can affect hearing and balance. The most common cause of inner ear problems is infection, usually caused by a virus. Talk to a doctor.

For more information

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthdirect.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on
CMI leaflets.

NPS Medicine Wise

Medicines Information Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26
from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts.

*Ask a pharmacist for advice when
choosing a medicine.*

Related fact cards

» Antibiotics

» Colds and Flu

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Your Self Care Pharmacy: