

Ear Infections in Babies and Children: Causes, Symptoms, and Treatment



Highlights

Ear infections are common in children between the ages of 6 months and 18 months.

There are 2 common types of ear infections: otitis media and outer ear infections.

Most ear infections clear up without treatment.

In This Article

What is an ear infection?

What are the symptoms of ear infections?

What causes ear infections?

When should I take my child to see a doctor?

How are ear infections diagnosed?

How are ear infections treated?

Can ear infections be prevented?

What complications are caused by ear infections?

What is an ear infection?

Ear infections are common in babies and young children, especially between the ages of 6 and 18 months.

An ear infection often clears up on its own within a few days. Your child's ears might be painful for 2 to 3 days. Pain relief medication can help.

If the infection lasts, it can affect your child's hearing. See a doctor if your child experiences painful ears.

What are the symptoms of ear infections?

Ear infections can be very painful. Older children can tell you that their ears hurt, but younger children can't. You might notice them pulling or poking their ear.

Children might also develop a fever, vomiting, or have problems with their balance.

An outer ear infection can make the ear and the area around it:

- Red
- Itchy
- Swollen
- Painful to touch

What causes ear infections?

There are 2 common types of ear infections:

Middle ear infection (otitis media)

The most common type of ear infection is otitis media. It is caused by bacteria or viruses entering the ear from the throat via the Eustachian tube. Children have shorter and narrower Eustachian tubes, making them prone to middle ear infections. As they grow, these tubes become longer, reducing the likelihood of infections.

A sinus allergy can also cause swelling and blockage of the Eustachian tube,

leading to infection.

Infections lead to a build-up of fluid inside the ear, causing pressure and pain. This fluid usually drains in a few days without treatment.

If the fluid doesn't drain quickly, the eardrum may burst, and yellow or bloody discharge may come from the ear. Once this happens, the pain usually subsides as the pressure is relieved. A burst eardrum typically heals on its own, but it's important to prevent further infections.

Outer ear infection

Outer ear infection, also known as otitis externa or "swimmer's ear," is often caused by excess moisture in the ear canal, particularly after swimming.

Damage to the ear canal, such as from cleaning ears with cotton buds, can also lead to infection.

When should I take my child to see a doctor?

You should see a doctor if:

Your child is unwell with an ear infection.

Your child's pain hasn't improved after 1-2 days.

Your child has frequent ear infections.

There is redness and tenderness behind your child's ear.

You are concerned about your child's hearing or language development.

How are ear infections diagnosed?

If a doctor suspects an ear infection, they will look into the ear to check the ear canal and eardrum.

The doctor can also check the pressure in the middle ear using a test that measures eardrum movement.

How are ear infections treated?

Most ear infections clear up in a few days without treatment. Antibiotics typically don't help, so pain relief is the main treatment.

You should:

Give your child pain relief medicine as recommended for their age and weight.

Not clean the ear with cotton buds or cotton wool.

Not let your child get water in their ears if their eardrum has burst until it has healed.

Only use ear drops if recommended by a doctor or pharmacist.

If your child experiences recurring infections or glue ear for over 3 months, a doctor may refer them to a specialist (e.g., an ENT specialist). Treatment options may include:

Long courses of antibiotics

Grommets to allow drainage

Can ear infections be prevented?

Middle ear infections often occur after a cold, so keeping your child generally healthy helps.

Avoid exposure to cigarette smoke, which can reduce fluid drainage in the ear.

Wearing earplugs when swimming can help protect your child from swimmer's ear.

What complications are caused by ear infections?

Glue ear is a common condition that can follow middle ear infections. It causes fluid to build up in the middle ear, preventing it from draining. Although it might not cause pain, it can affect your child's hearing.

Persistent glue ear can affect your child's language development, so it's important to get treatment.