



Pharmaceutical
Society of Australia



Ear Problems

Ear problems can involve the outer, middle or inner ear and commonly include infection, inflammation, damage from foreign bodies and wax build up. The diagnosis of ear problems is often best made by a doctor who can examine the ear with a special instrument. Treatment is usually simple and effective.

Ear wax

Production of ear wax is normal in children and adults. The wax usually moves outward along the ear canal assisted by repetitive movements such as chewing and talking. Wax build up in the outer ear is one of the most common causes of temporary hearing loss.

Symptoms include:

- Ear discomfort
- A feeling that ear is blocked or full
- Noise in ears (tinnitus)
- Reduced hearing.

Treatment

Ear wax can often be dislodged by wax softening ear drops. (**Note:** some products contain oils derived from nuts). If ear drops are not successful, a wax plug may be flushed out with warm water or saline (called 'syringing'). A doctor can also remove ear wax with a special instrument. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

Self care

- Let each ear clean itself – as wax comes out of the ear canal, wipe it away with a cloth covered finger.
- Do not clean ear canal with hairpins, cotton buds, pencils or other objects – wax may be pushed further down the canal or the canal or ear drum damaged.

Otitis externa

Otitis externa is inflammation or infection of the outer ear canal. The outer ear canal is the skin lined canal 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 ear (may be smelly)
- Feeling of fullness in ear
- Reduced hearing.

Treatment

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

- Pain relieving medicine (e.g., paracetamol, ibuprofen)
- Careful cleansing and drying of ear canal
- Ear drops to relieve inflammation and clear infection.

Self care

To prevent otitis externa, keep the ear canals dry.

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

Important

- Take children with ear ache to a doctor as soon as possible.
- If you have recently had a discharge from your ears or an ear infection, or have had a burst eardrum in the past, get a doctor to check your eardrum before using ear drops.
- Consult a doctor if any of the following occurs with an ear problem:
 - Pain lasting more than 24 hours
 - Fever, dizziness, stiff neck
 - Discharge
 - Hearing loss or ringing in the ears
 - Balance problems.

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 ear (may be smelly)
- Reduced hearing
- Noise if object is an insect.

Treatment

It is best to consult a doctor for removal of foreign bodies.

Self care

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

Otitis media

Otitis media is inflammation or infection of the middle ear. The middle ear is the air-filled cavity immediately 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 ear
- Fever
- Vomiting
- Irritability – infants may be unsettled, wake at night, rub their ears, have diarrhoea, lose their appetite.

Treatment

Consult a doctor about otitis media. Treatment may include:

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

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

Self care

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

Glue ear (otitis media with effusion)

Glue ear is persistent build up of thick fluid in the middle ear, with no signs of acute infection. Some children who get frequent otitis media develop a glue ear. It occurs when fluid in the middle ear does not drain out properly.

Symptoms include:

- Ear pain
- Reduced hearing
- Behavioural problems due to reduced hearing.

Glue ear may lead to permanent ear damage and impaired speech development.

Treatment

Consult 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-repelling 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 viral. Consult a doctor.

Related fact cards

- *Antibiotics*
- *Colds and Flu*
- *Pain Relievers*
- *Sinus Problems*

For more information

HEALTHInsite – website www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.