

Ear infections

Ear infections are very common, particularly in children.

You do not always need to see a GP for an ear infection. They often get better on their own within 3 days.

Symptoms of an ear infection

The symptoms of an ear infection usually start quickly and include:

- pain inside the ear
- a [high temperature](#) of 38 degrees Celsius or above
- being sick
- a lack of energy
- difficulty hearing
- fluid coming from the ear
- a feeling of pressure or fullness inside the ear
- itching and irritation in and around the ear
- scaly skin in and around the ear

Young children and babies with an ear infection may also:

- rub or pull their ear
- not react to some sounds
- be irritable or restless
- refuse their food
- lose their balance

Most ear infections clear up within 3 days. But sometimes symptoms can last up to 1 week.

Types of ear infections

There are two main types of ear infection:

- middle ear infection (otitis media)
- outer ear infection (otitis externa)

Middle ear infection (otitis media)

Middle ear infections usually affect children. They are caused by viruses such as colds and flu. A middle ear infection affects the eustachian tube, which runs behind the eardrum to the back of the nose.

Outer ear infection (otitis externa)

Outer ear infections usually affect adults age 45 to 75. They are caused by something irritating the ear canal, such as eczema, water or wearing ear plugs. An outer ear infection affects the ear canal, which runs between the outer ear and the eardrum.

How to treat an ear infection yourself

To help relieve pain and discomfort from an ear infection:

Do

- ✓ use painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen - do not give aspirin to children under 16
- ✓ place a warm or cold face cloth on the ear
- ✓ remove any discharge by wiping the ear with cotton wool

Don't

- ✗ do not put anything inside your ear to remove earwax, such as cotton buds or your finger
- ✗ do not let water or shampoo get in your ear
- ✗ do not use decongestants or antihistamines – they do not help with ear infections

How a pharmacist can help with an ear infection

Talk to a pharmacist if you think you have an outer ear infection.

They can recommend eardrops to help stop bacteria or fungus spreading.

See a GP if

you or your child has:

- a very high temperature (40 degree Celsius or more) or feel hot and shivery
- earache that does not start to improve after 3 days
- swelling around the ear
- fluid coming from the ear
- hearing loss or a change in hearing
- other symptoms, such as being sick, a severe sore throat or dizziness
- regular ear infections
- a long-term medical condition, such as diabetes or a heart, lung, kidney or neurological disease
- a weakened immune system

What happens at your GP appointment

Your GP will often use a small light (otoscope) to look in the ear.

Some otoscopes blow a small puff of air into the ear. This checks for blockages, which could be a sign of an infection.

How a GP can help with an ear infection

Your GP may prescribe medicine for your ear infection, depending on what caused it.

Middle ear infections

Infections in the middle ear (behind the eardrum) often clear up on their own. Antibiotics make little difference to symptoms, including pain.

Antibiotics might be prescribed if you or your child has:

- symptoms that do not improve after 3 days
- fluid coming out of the ear
- a risk of complications, due to an illness such as cystic fibrosis

They may also be prescribed if your child is under 2 and has an infection in both ears.

Outer ear infections

Your GP might prescribe:

- antibiotic eardrops - to treat a bacterial infection
- steroid eardrops - to bring down swelling

- antifungal eardrops - to treat a fungal infection
- antibiotic tablets - if your bacterial infection is severe

If you have a spot or boil in your ear, your GP may pierce it with a needle to drain the pus.

Eardrops may not work if they're not used correctly.

How to use eardrops

1. Remove any visible discharge or earwax using cotton wool.
2. Hold the bottle in your hand to warm it. Cold eardrops can make you feel dizzy.
3. Lie on your side with the affected ear facing up to put in the recommended number of drops.
4. Gently pull and push your ear so the drops go in well.

Stay lying down for 5 minutes so the drops do not come out.

How to prevent an ear infection

You cannot always prevent ear infections. This is particularly the case with ear infections caused by colds and flu.

To help avoid ear infections in children:

- make sure your child is up to date with vaccinations
- keep your child away from smoky environments
- try not to give your child a dummy after they're 6 months old

To help avoid outer ear infections:

- do not put cotton buds or your fingers in your ears
- use ear plugs or a swimming hat over your ears when you swim
- try not to get water or shampoo in your ears when you have a shower or bath
- treat conditions that affect your ears, such as an allergy to hearing aids or [eczema](#)

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