



[Home](#) → [Medical Encyclopedia](#) → Ear drainage culture

URL of this page: //medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003763.htm

Ear drainage culture

An ear drainage culture is a lab test. This test checks for germs that can cause infection. The sample taken for this test can contain fluid, pus, wax, or blood from the ear.

How the Test is Performed

A sample of ear drainage is needed. Your health care provider will use a cotton swab to collect the sample from inside the outer ear canal. In some cases, a sample is collected from the middle ear during ear surgery.

The sample is sent to a lab and placed on a special dish (culture media).

The lab team checks the dish every day to see if bacteria, fungi, or viruses have grown. More tests may be done to look for specific germs and determine the best treatment.

How to Prepare for the Test

You do not need to prepare for this test.

How the Test will Feel

Using a cotton swab to take a sample of drainage from the outer ear is not painful. However, ear pain may be present if the ear is infected.

Ear surgery is done using general anesthesia. You will be asleep and feel no pain.

Why the Test is Performed

The test may be done if you or your child has:

- An ear infection that is not getting better with treatment
- An infection of the outer ear (otitis externa)
- An ear infection with a ruptured eardrum and draining fluid

It may also be done as a routine part of myringotomy.

Note: Ear infections are diagnosed based on symptoms rather than using a culture.

Normal Results

The test is normal if there is no growth on the culture.

Normal value ranges may vary slightly among different laboratories. Talk to your provider about the meaning of your specific test results.

What Abnormal Results Mean

Abnormal results may be a sign of an infection. The infection can be caused by bacteria, viruses, or fungi.

The test results may show which organism is causing the infection. It will help your provider decide on the right treatment.

Risks

No risks are involved with swabbing the ear canal. Ear surgery may involve some risks.

Alternative Names

Culture - ear drainage

References

Pelton SI. Otitis externa, otitis media, and mastoiditis. In: Bennett JE, Dolin R, Blaser MJ, eds. *Mandell, Douglas, and Bennett's Principles and Practice of Infectious Diseases*. 9th ed. Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier; 2020:chap 61.

Player B. Otitis media. In: Kliegman RM, St. Geme JW, Blum NJ, et al, eds. *Nelson Textbook of Pediatrics*. 22nd ed. Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier; 2025:chap 680.

Schilder AGM, Rosenfeld RM, Venekamp RP. Acute otitis media and otitis media with effusion. In: Flint PW, Francis HW, Haughey BH, et al, eds. *Cummings Otolaryngology: Head and Neck Surgery*. 7th ed. Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier; 2021:chap 199.

Review Date 7/31/2024

Updated by: Charles I. Schwartz, MD, FAAP, Clinical Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, General Pediatrician at PennCare for Kids, Phoenixville, PA. Also reviewed by David C. Dugdale, MD, Medical Director, Brenda Conaway, Editorial Director, and the A.D.A.M. Editorial team.

Learn how to cite this page



A.D.A.M., Inc. is accredited by URAC, for Health Content Provider (www.urac.org). URAC's [accreditation program](#) is an independent audit to verify that A.D.A.M. follows rigorous standards of quality and accountability. A.D.A.M. is among the first to achieve this important distinction for online health information and services. Learn more about A.D.A.M.'s [editorial policy](#), [editorial process](#), and [privacy policy](#).

The information provided herein should not be used during any medical emergency or for the diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. A licensed medical professional should be consulted for diagnosis and treatment of any and all medical conditions. Links to other sites are provided for information only – they do not constitute endorsements of those other sites. No warranty of any kind, either expressed or implied, is made as to the accuracy, reliability, timeliness, or correctness of any translations made by a third-party service of the information provided herein into any other language. © 1997-2025 A.D.A.M., a business unit of Ebix, Inc. Any duplication or distribution of the information contained herein is strictly prohibited.



National Library of Medicine 8600 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, MD 20894 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

National Institutes of Health