

EAR INFECTION

INTRODUCTION

Ear infections can be caused by bacteria, viruses or fungi. They are most common in childhood, and are often passed from one child to another, but they can happen at any age.

Ear infections can be uncomfortable but are not usually serious. Sometimes, fluid built up behind the eardrum can cause so much pressure on the membrane that a hole forms (perforated eardrum). These usually heal by themselves. Occasionally an ear infection can lead to complications such as infection of the bone by the ear, and in rare cases meningitis (swelling of the brain) may develop. Ear infections are unlikely to cause permanent loss or impairment of hearing.

Infections of the *middle ear* are called **otitis media**, and infections of the *outer ear* are called **otitis externa**.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms of an outer ear infection include swelling, itching, and sometimes you might have fluid or yellow/green pus coming out of your ear. Infections of the outer ear don't usually affect your hearing. In a middle ear infection, the space behind your eardrum gets filled up with fluid or mucus, and gets infected. It can cause earache, high temperature, slight deafness, and children often feel tired or sick. Sometimes the eardrum bursts and fluid comes out of your ear.

CAUSES

Outer ear infections can spread from general skin infections, or might just happen on your ear. They can be caused by:

- Viruses like herpes.
- Bacteria such as Staphylococci, or
- Fungi such as Candida, which causes thrush.

Infections often get into the outer ear because of scratching the skin. You might scratch the skin because it is itchy due to eczema or psoriasis inside the ear. You might also damage skin and allow infection to enter if you put objects such as cotton buds or pencils

in your ear to try to get rid of earwax.

Inner ear infections are often caused by the common cold, which spreads through the tube that connects your ears and nose (the Eustachian tube). They can also be caused by common childhood illnesses such as measles, or by getting water in your ear when you have a burst eardrum.

TREATMENT

The treatment for ear infections depends on the cause.

Most *middle ear* infections clear up without treatment in about three days. Nose drops, bought over the counter, can help to reduce any swelling inside the nose and Eustachian tubes (often caused by the common cold), and ease the pressure on the ear.

Outer *ear infections* might be treated with lotions, creams, or ear-drops containing anti-bacterial, anti-fungal, or moisturising ingredients. These can be applied inside your ear canal on a special piece of gauze. You might also be given corticosteroid cream to reduce swelling and redness inside the ear.

You might have to take antibiotics if it's a bacterial infection, but it is often hard for doctors to tell the difference between viral and bacterial infections - if it is a viral infection, antibiotics will not work.

Over-the-counter painkillers such as paracetamol can be taken to relieve any pain.

Children who keep getting ear infections might have tiny tubes called grommets put into their eardrums, to help fluid drain out of the ear. This is a common operation that usually takes about 20 minutes under a general anesthetic.