

EAR INFECTION

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

During ear infections, fluid may build up behind the eardrum that causes 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 including ear damage or in rare cases meningitis (swelling of the brain). Ear infections are unlikely to cause permanent hearing loss but early treatment is important. 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 a clear or yellow/green discharge from the ear. In a middle ear infection, the space behind the eardrum gets filled up with fluid or mucus, and gets infected. It can cause earache, high temperature, slight deafness, and in children, tiredness and vomiting. Sometimes the eardrum bursts and fluid comes out of the ear.

Causes

Outer ear infections can spread from general skin infection or there may be no obvious cause. Infections often get into the outer ear because of scratching the skin. Inner ear infections are often caused by a common cold, which spreads through the tube that connects the ears and nose. They can also be caused by common childhood illnesses such as measles or getting water in the ear when you have a burst eardrum.

Treatment

Most middle ear infections clear up without treatment in about three days. Short term nasal decongestant drops, sprays or tablets available from pharmacies can reduce swelling inside the nose and ear tubes (often caused by the common cold), and ease the pressure on the ear.

Outer ear infections can be treated with lotions, creams, or ear-drops containing anti-bacterial, anti-fungal, or moisturising ingredients. A corticosteroid cream may be required to reduce swelling and redness inside the ear. You might have to take antibiotics if it's a bacterial infection. These are all meant for short term use only and available on prescription only. Over-the-counter painkillers such as paracetamol can relieve pain.

Children who get repeated ear infections can 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.

Disclaimer: Please ensure you consult with your healthcare professional before making any changes recommended

For comprehensive and free health advice and information call in to Whelehans, log on to www.whelehans.ie or dial 04493 34591. You can also e-mail queries to info@whelehans.ie.