

# Tips to Treat an Ear Infection

Ear infections are common in babies and children. They can make your child fussy and uncomfortable, but the good news is that many ear infections can be treated without antibiotics. In this handout, you will learn tips to help treat your child's ear infection without antibiotics.

## WHAT IS AN EAR INFECTION?

An **ear infection** is when bacteria or a virus (germs) affects the middle ear, just behind the **eardrum** (inner part of your ear that helps you hear sounds). Ear infections usually go away within a week.

## WHAT CAUSES AN EAR INFECTION?

An ear infection can be caused by bacteria or a virus that enters the middle ear. Ear infections are not **contagious** (you can't catch them from other people).

Sometimes, your child can get an ear infection from a cold. The cold **virus** (germ) enters your child's ear and can cause an ear infection.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF AN EAR INFECTION?

- Pulling on the ears
- Fluid coming out of the ears
- Fussiness or crying
- Fever
- Headache
- Hard time hearing
- Trouble balancing



5 out of every 6 children will have at least 1 ear infection by age 3.

## HOW CAN I TREAT AN EAR INFECTION?

- Use baby or children's ibuprofen or acetaminophen to treat pain from the ear infection. Ibuprofen is also known as Children's Motrin® or Children's Advil®. Acetaminophen is also known as Children's Tylenol®.
- Use a cool-air humidifier or shower steam to loosen mucus or fluid in the ear.
- Keep your child's mattress flat, especially if he/she is under age 1.
- Don't let your child drink anything while lying down. This can make his/her ear infection worse.
- Don't smoke around your child. Smoking can increase your child's risk of getting an ear infection.

### Did you know?

Not every ear infection should or can be treated with antibiotics. Antibiotics only treat illnesses caused by bacteria. They can also cause some uncomfortable side effects, like upset stomach or diarrhea. If your child's ear infection is caused by a virus, antibiotics won't help. You have to let an ear infection caused by a virus run its course.

In some cases, it will be safer to "watch and wait" before starting antibiotics. This is true if he/she is over age 2, is not seriously sick or doesn't have a history of ear problems.

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Image courtesy of Piktochart®.

Adapted from "Ear Infections: Treatment Without Antibiotics" by Vandana Madhavan, MD, MPH  
<https://giving.massgeneral.org/treating-ear-infections-without-antibiotics/>