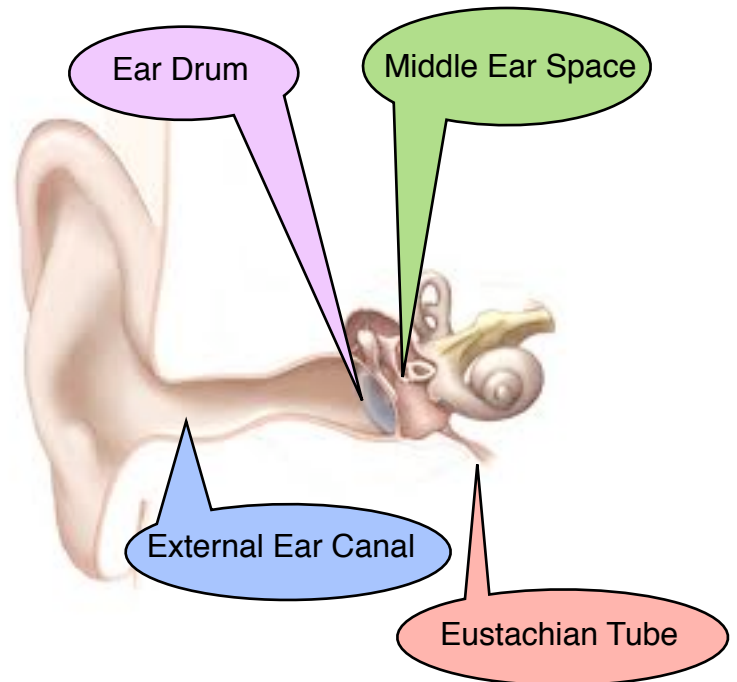


Ear Pain

It's 2 AM and your child wakes up complaining of ear pain. What to do? This story is pretty familiar to many parents. In fact, estimates are that 75% of children will experience a painful ear infection before the age of 3 years. (And it *always* seems to happen when the office is closed...)

There are, in fact, a number of problems which can cause ear pain in children. Ear infections typically involve infected fluid in the middle ear space behind the ear drum. Children can also develop infections of the external ear canal. Sometimes pressure or fluid will develop in the middle ear space which is not acutely infected, sometimes the result of nasal congestion or Eustachian tube dysfunction. Wax impaction in the canal can be painful at times. And children have been known to stick a variety of things into the ear causing pain. (Never stick cotton swabs or Q-tips into the ear canal.)



What To Do First

The first thing to do is **treat the pain**. You can use acetaminophen or ibuprofen. (Dosing is discussed in a separate document. Use the maximum recommended weight based dose.) In most cases, this will control a child's pain for at least a few hours. You can also apply a cold pack or a cold, wet washcloth to the ear for comfort for about 20 minutes at a time. Some children may prefer a warm washcloth.

In some cases, it may also be helpful to apply some olive oil or other plain cooking oil to the ear. (Do not do this if there is fluid or blood draining from the ear, nor in children with surgical ear tubes in place.) Warm the oil in your palm for a few minutes first, so that it reaches body temperature. Then, with your child lying on his or her side, drip a few drops of oil into the canal. This can provide significant relief for ear pain and may be repeated every 2-4 hours as necessary. Analgesic (pain relief) ear drops can also be helpful and are available by prescription. Please do not put drops in the ear before coming to see the doctor, as we may not be able to see properly.

What To Do Next

The next thing, of course, is to examine the ear. As much as people would like us to do this over the phone, **there is no way to accurately diagnose and care for ear pain without examining the ear**. (One recent study showed the predictive accuracy of a suspicious history to be only 51% when it comes to ear infections in children, which would make telephone diagnoses about as accurate as flipping a coin!) However, if you

can avoid it, we do generally recommend against taking children with ear pain to emergency rooms or walk-in centers.

- You want a provider with extensive experience with pediatric ear disease. As much as this is a common problem, it turns out also to be one that can be a bit tricky to diagnose properly.
- The most important part of managing pediatric ear disease can be the continuity over time. The frequency of infection, the previous medications used, and the details of earlier examinations can all be important in deciding what to do next. This information is frequently lost when care is spread across multiple providers.
- Delaying antibiotic therapy for 24-48 hours will not change the outcome. In many cases, children with ear infections do not require antibiotics at all.

As long as you can control the pain, the best thing to do is to bring these children to their primary care provider or ear specialist for proper management as soon as possible. We have routine office hours 6 days per week and, even though the office is generally closed on Sunday, we can usually arrange to have your child seen if you call in the morning.

What To Watch For

Happily, ear pain in children rarely signals a dangerous problem. Still, there are a few things to keep in mind.

- In some ear infections, the ear drum will rupture or leak, causing blood or pus to drain from the ear canal. Don't Panic! These infections almost always heal without difficulty. Clean any visible drainage from the ear, do not put anything in the ear unless prescribed by your doctor, and call the next day to schedule an appointment.
- Call us if you are unable to control the pain or any accompanying fever.
- Watch for redness or swelling around the ear. This can indicate a more serious infection, especially if accompanied by high fevers.
- Clear, watery drainage from the ear following head trauma could indicate a skull fracture. Call us or head to the nearest appropriate medical facility.