

Ear Pain

Ear pain is a common complaint in children, and a common concern of parents. Toddlers and school age children will be able to describe ear pain, while infants may simply be more fussy, sleep poorly, or refuse to feed well in response to ear pain. Causes of ear pain include middle ear infection, external ear infection, trauma to the ear drum, ear canal, or external ear. Children have also been known to put small objects in their ears, which may lead to pain or rupture of the ear drum.

What to do about ear pain?

Treatment of ear pain depends on its cause. When a child complains of ear pain, initially a dose of ibuprofen or acetaminophen may help relieve their discomfort. In older children, a warm compress on the external ear may also help. Younger children and infants may get some relief from keeping them in a sitting or upright position. We do not recommend putting anything into a child's ear canal (including Q-tips, ear drops) without our advice, especially if there is drainage coming from the ear. Most causes of ear pain can be eased temporarily by following these tips. Any child with persistent ear pain should be evaluated in our office.

What about ear infections?

Many parents worry that their child may have an ear infection when they complain of ear pain. A middle ear infection (otitis media) is an infection that is caused by a bacteria or virus in the middle ear, behind the ear drum. Frequently, this occurs following a blockage of the eustachian tube due to a cold, sore throat or allergy, which leads to accumulation of fluid behind the ear drum. Infection of this fluid causes pressure on the ear drum, leading to ear pain. In most infants and younger children, ear infections are treated with an antibiotic. When the antibiotic begins to work on the infection, the pressure will lessen, and the pain will decrease. Because this may take some time, we recommend also using ibuprofen or acetaminophen to alleviate the pain. Current research has shown that in older children and adolescents, many ear infections will resolve without the use of an antibiotic. We will discuss whether an antibiotic is needed and which one to use after evaluating your child.

Another common cause of ear pain is an external ear infection, or "swimmer's ear". This is due to a growth of bacteria in the external ear canal which leads to redness, drainage, and discomfort. It typically follows repeated episodes of swimming, thus the name swimmer's ear. We will usually treat this with an antibiotic drop placed directly into the ear canal.