



EAR INFECTIONS

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

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The human ear has three parts:

- 1) the external ear which contains the ear canal and eardrum
- 2) the middle ear, which contains the hearing bones
- 3) the inner ear, which contains the hearing and balance canals

External ear infections are common in people of all ages. Infections usually occur while swimming (swimmer's ear), but can also occur when the ear canal skin is injured. The bacteria in the ear canal can then invade the skin, causing the skin to swell and block the canal. External ear infections can be very painful. Ear drops, water precautions, and sometimes oral antibiotics are necessary to treat these external ear infections.

Middle ear infections are common in children. At times the ear infections can be treated with antibiotics. If the infection persists despite antibiotics, it may be necessary to drain the infection by making a hole in the ear drum (also known as the tympanic membrane). Some patients, especially children, who develop recurrent or persistent ear infections may require placement of PE (also known as pressure equalization) Tubes. This can be performed in an outpatient surgical center under a general anesthetic. Infections that are untreated or persistent can also damage the hearing bones (called the ossicles), cause a permanent hearing loss, or result in a cyst called a cholesteatoma. The infection can also rarely cause facial paralysis and even meningitis.

Inner ear infections are usually caused by viruses. Some occur after upper respiratory infections. Since the inner ear contains the hearing and balance organs, patients can have symptoms that include dizziness, nausea, vomiting, hearing loss, tinnitus, ear pain, and ear fullness and ear pressure. Patients can have some or all of these symptoms. At times the dizziness is so severe that patients are seen in the emergency room. If the patient feels that the ear is full or that the hearing is muffled, it is important to do a hearing test. If a hearing loss is not treated soon after the onset with steroids given orally and/or through the ear drum (called intratympanic steroid therapy) a permanent hearing loss can result. It is important to see an ear doctor immediately in these instances. Even though the infection is believed to be viral, antibiotics and even antiviral medications usually don't help. The dizziness usually improves slowly, over several days. Usually the spinning sensation (called vertigo) improves over several days. Meclizine or Antivert can be used for a few days to help the patient get over the acute symptoms. The sensation of being off balance can last several weeks or even several months. It is important to not take meclizine too long, because the patient's recovery can be delayed on this medication. The best thing to do is to stay as active as you can. Walking is the best exercise.