



What causes ear infections?

Common colds, allergies, or second-hand smoke cause fluid to build up in the ear. This fluid may become infected by germs (bacteria and viruses). Next to a cold, an ear infection is the most common childhood illness.

Which ear infections need to be treated?

Ear infections can be caused by either bacteria or viruses. Antibiotics will only help if the infection is caused by bacteria. This type of infection usually causes fever, irritability, and ear pain that comes on quickly.

Does my child need an antibiotic?

Your health care provider is the best person to decide if your child needs an antibiotic. If your child is more than six months old, your provider may write a prescription for antibiotics but ask you to fill it only if the symptoms don't get better in 48-72 hours. This helps make sure that your child gets antibiotics only if they're really needed. This cuts down on side effects like stomach upset, diarrhea and skin rash. It also slows the growth and spread of dangerous "superbacteria" that can't be killed by normal doses of antibiotics.

My child got antibiotics for an ear infection, but the cough and runny nose haven't gotten any better.

Do we need to switch antibiotics?

Probably not. Most of the time your child gets an ear infection, it's because they have a cold (caused by a virus) that made fluid build up in the middle ear and led to the ear infection. If the ear infection is caused by bacteria, then symptoms from the ear infection (fever, ear pain, or irritability) should clear up after a day or two on antibiotics. The cough and runny nose are caused by the virus and won't get better with antibiotics.

What can I do to help my child?

Your health care provider may recommend acetaminophen (like Tylenol®) for any pain. If your provider prescribes an antibiotic, make sure your child takes all the medicine as directed, even if he or she begins to feel better after a few days. Kids with ear infections do not need to stay home if they are feeling well. If they need to take an antibiotic at school or childcare, make sure someone can give them their medication on time.

What if the fluid stays in the ear after an ear infection is treated?

Your health care provider can check your child's ears for fluid. It usually goes away on its own in a few months. If it stays longer than this, it may affect your child's hearing. If fluid stays in the middle ear for a long time, ask your provider about what is needed.

What can I do to prevent infections?

Wash your hands regularly, clean and disinfect surfaces regularly, and don't smoke around children.