

AHRQ Safety Program for Telemedicine: Improving Antibiotic Use

Ear Infection in Children (Acute Otitis Media) – Patient Guide

What is an ear infection or “acute otitis media”?

- An ear infection is also called acute otitis media.
- Ear infections are most common in young children.
- Ear infections can cause fever, ear pain, poor sleep, irritability, and sometimes ear drainage.

What should I do to help my child feel better?

- Medicines like acetaminophen (commonly called Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (commonly called Advil® or Motrin®) can help with ear pain and fever; follow the instructions on the package based on your child’s age. Store brands are just as good as name brands.
- Avoid applying heat or cold to the ear or putting any smoothing liquids in the ear as these can cause injury.



When will my child feel better?

- If your healthcare provider determined that your child may have acute otitis media, your child should feel better within 3 days. It may take 1-2 days more to improve without antibiotics.
- Antibiotics can have side effects like diarrhea or rashes and make future ear infections harder to treat; your healthcare provider weighs the risks and benefits of antibiotics when deciding if they make sense for your child.

When should I contact my healthcare provider?

- Seek medical attention if your child’s symptoms worsen or fail to demonstrate any improvement within 48 to 72 hours, regardless of whether antibiotics were prescribed or not.
- Seek immediate medical care if your child is becoming confused, lethargic, develops persistent vomiting, is increasingly tired, or is ill appearing.
- If you notice that one ear is suddenly sticking out or there is redness behind one of the ears, you should also seek immediate medical care for your child.

This document is intended to provide health-related information so that you may be better informed. It is not a substitute for your healthcare provider’s medical advice and should not be relied upon for treatment for specific medical conditions.



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