

## Ear Infections in Adults

**Acute earache:** Don't assume you will need antibiotics. In most cases, you can treat it at home for 2-3 days, and see a doctor if it does not improve during that time. If you have fever and generalized illness, there may be fluid in the middle ear (behind the eardrum), causing single-sided ear pain. Don't ignore it - you need to rest, and treat it as detailed below.

**Discharge from the ear:** Usually means the eardrum is perforated and leaking. Do not put anything (drops, q-tips, or water) in the ear. Ask a doctor to look at it. Perforations heal by themselves. Please don't go to the emergency room, unless you're convinced you'll need hospitalization.

**Middle ear fluid** can also occur without infection or inflammation, due to cold or allergy. It clears by itself, but this can take up to 3 months. Assist the process with jaw and neck stretches (to mobilize the anatomy), warm compresses to the area 4 times a day (to amplify the blood and lymph circulation), and gentle inflation of the Eustachian tube (see below).

**Medicines:** You can take an expectorant, which thins out mucus, including middle-ear fluid, facilitating its reabsorption. Expectorants include guaifenesin (brand name Mucinex, over the counter) and herbal expectorants (horehound, elecampane, grindelia). Use expectorants on a scheduled basis once or twice a day, while you have symptoms. Stay well hydrated - mucus needs water, to thin it out.

**If you have allergies**, work on reducing your exposure to triggers, and take antihistamines on a scheduled basis while you have symptoms. You can also consider a mast-cell stabilizer, cromolyn (over the counter). It stops the allergic reaction before histamine is released from the mast cells lining the nose, throat, and eye tissues. Chronic allergy might call for a steroid spray, to reduce chronic inflammation of nasal and sinus tissues.

**Eustachian tube dysfunction**, from allergies or colds, is the commonest cause of fluid behind the eardrum in adults. The Eustacian ("you-station") tube ventilates the middle ear, connecting it to the throat. It is surrounded by the muscles of the palate (roof of the throat), and opens or closes as you yawn, swallow, sing, or otherwise use your palate. (When your ears "pop" at high altitudes, it's the Eustacian tube opening, equalizing the air pressure from the outside world to the middle ear chamber.) If the Eustacian tube and palate are swollen or compressed by throat and nasal irritation, the tube doesn't ventilate the middle ear chamber properly.

### Eustacian tube therapies:

- Neck, throat, and jaw exercises - yawns, gentle neck rolls, gargling, deep singing.
- "Insufflation" - Because frequent sniffing can create negative air pressure in the middle ear, equalizing the pressure via the Eustacian tube can help. Insufflation means you plug your nose (and you may also plug the unaffected ear), and gently blow, until you feel and hear the inner ear gently inflate. Don't be scared; be gentle! Reportedly, most people can only generate about 1/3 the pressure needed to do any harm to the middle ear. Do not use an air pump or other forceful pressure, however.
- Saline nasal irrigation (saltwater-and-baking-soda "neti pot") can help rinse away allergens and reduce nasal swelling. Once a day (in the shower?), when you have symptoms, is enough - don't overdo it, or harm the delicate nasal tissues.
- Salt water gargle - reduces swelling of the upper throat tissues as well.

### Things to avoid:

- Dehydration. Drink water and herb tea with honey, not coffee, soda, or alcohol.
- Nicotine and secondhand cigarette smoke. It reduces ear-tissue function, the same way it reduces airway-tissue function.
- Nasal sprays, with the exception of plain salt-water rinses. Decongestant nasal sprays produce rebound swelling around the Eustacian tube.
- Decongestants, including those in "cold medicines" like NyQuil and Robitussin. These may thicken up the mucous fluid in the middle ear, making it take longer to reabsorb.

**Please contact your doctor early and often**, if you are concerned that your earache or other illness may be complicated, with unusual or very severe symptoms, or is not responding to combined home therapies.

More about Eustacian tube dysfunction: <http://bit.ly/Xyynhz>

More about nasal irrigation: <http://bit.ly/OBkF6s>

Ear-nose anatomy diagram: <http://bit.ly/X9olzT>