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Earache

What is an earache?

An earache is sharp, dull, or throbbing pain in one or both ears. It may come and go or it may be constant. You may also have muffled hearing and a feeling of pressure or blockage. Children may rub or tug on the painful ear.

What causes earaches?

Earaches can be caused by:

- injury to the ear
- infection or disease in the middle or outer ear
- infection in the nose, sinuses, mouth, or throat
- infection or injury of the jaw
- changes in altitude or air pressure, for example, when you fly in an airplane
- changes in temperature, for example, when you have been outside in cold temperatures and then walk into a warm room
- a buildup of earwax
- an object, growth, or insect in the ear.

Middle ear infection is a common cause of earache, especially in children. The infection often begins as a cold, sinus infection, or throat infection. It may cause other symptoms such as colored nasal discharge, fever, dizziness, loss of appetite, hearing loss, and a feeling of blockage in the ear.

An infection of the outer ear and ear canal may occur when your ear is exposed to moisture that gets trapped in the ear. It usually causes pain or discomfort in or around the ear or when moving the earlobe. You may have redness, swelling, and itching of the ear. Sometimes you will have a feeling of fullness in your ear and have some hearing loss.

How is it treated?

Some ear infections may be treated with antibiotics. If you have an infection, your health care provider may wait 1 to 3 days to see if the symptoms go away on their own before prescribing an antibiotic. Bacteria can become resistant to antibiotics, which means the antibiotic might not kill

the bacteria. Also, the medicine can cause side effects. Your provider may recommend a nonprescription pain reliever and a decongestant (tablets or a nasal spray) to relieve pressure in the middle ear.

Objects in the ear canal, including impacted wax, should be removed by your health care provider.

Other treatments depend on the cause of the earache. For example, chewing gum, drinking fluids, or sucking on candy may help stop aching caused by temperature changes or the change in pressure when you are going up or coming down in an airplane. Another way to relieve pressure in the ear is to blow out while keeping your mouth closed and nose pinched.

How can I help take care of myself?

- If you have an infection, follow your health care provider's instructions for taking medicine to treat it.
- A cold pack or cold wet cloth put on the ear for 20 minutes may help decrease pain. Or a warm moist washcloth or a covered hot water bottle put over the ear may help.
- A nonprescription pain medicine such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen can also provide relief. Remember that children under 18 years of age should not take aspirin or products containing salicylate because of the risk of Reye's syndrome unless recommended by a health care provider.
- Do not use any eardrops for an earache if there is drainage from the ear or if there are tubes in the ears.

When should I call my health care provider?

Call your provider if you have:

- a temperature over 102 degrees F (38.9 degrees C) that persists even after you take acetaminophen, aspirin, or ibuprofen
- a severe headache or worsening pain around the ear
- swelling around the ear
- increasing dizziness
- worsening of your hearing
- weakness of one side of your face.

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