

Ear infection

Middle ear infections (also called otitis media) are common in young children. An ear infection can cause pain, fever and temporary hearing loss. It can be caused by bacteria or viruses, and often appears after a cold. Occasionally the eardrum may perforate and you may see fluid coming from the child's ear.

Outer ear infections (otitis externa) occur on the outside of the eardrum, involving the ear canal. They are often associated with swimming.

Rarely, a middle ear infection may spread to the mastoid bone behind the ear, causing mastoiditis. The area behind the ear will be red, and the ear lobe will stick out. A child with these symptoms should see a doctor as soon as possible – this is a serious infection.

Most children will have occasional ear infections that are not serious and resolve quickly. Children who have recurrent ear infections may develop 'glue ear' – when the middle ear is filled with a sticky fluid that looks similar to honey. This may last for many weeks or months and makes it harder for the child to hear.

How it spreads

Isolated ear infections rarely spread from person to person. However, middle ear infections can follow a viral respiratory tract infection (for example, the common cold), which is very infectious.

Exclusion period

Do not exclude unless the ear infection is associated with other concerning symptoms.

Actions for educators and other staff

Treat any discharge from an ear as infectious – wash your hands thoroughly if they come in contact with ear discharge.

Ensure staff and children have good respiratory and hand hygiene.

Ensure staff use appropriate cleaning practices, as described in the *Staying healthy* guidelines.

Actions for parents and carers

Keep your child at home if they have a fever or other concerning symptoms.

If your child has frequent ear infections, talk to your doctor to rule out any underlying conditions that may be contributing to the infections.

More information about ear infection

See healthdirect for more information on prevention, diagnosis and treatment of ear infection (healthdirect.gov.au/ear-infection).

To find out if a child needs medical help:

- use the online symptom checker (healthdirect.gov.au/symptom-checker)
- speak to a registered nurse by calling the 24-hour health advice hotline on 1800 022 222.