

Otitis externa

It is an inflammation of the ear, often caused by an infection. There are two types: otitis media and otitis externa. It usually clears up without any problems after a few days, although complications and long-term effects may occur.

Otitis externa

This is an infection of the external auditory canal. When water enters the canal, it weakens the tissue, allowing bacteria or fungi to cause otitis externa.

Symptoms: It is, above all, a painful condition, characterised by a feeling of a blocked ear, the appearance of whiter, softer earwax, itching and, sometimes, discharge.

Treatment: It is usually treated with ear drops containing antibiotics and, occasionally, steroids to reduce the inflammation. Painkillers such as ibuprofen or paracetamol are used for the pain. Sometimes, oral antibiotics in tablet or syrup form are also prescribed. **Until the condition has cleared up, water must not be allowed to enter the ear.**

Prevention: To prevent external otitis, **avoid moisture in the ear and do not use cotton buds.** For swimmers who suffer from this condition, earplugs are often recommended when swimming.

Cotton buds are never recommended.

Otitis media

The middle ear is the cavity behind the eardrum. This is where the ossicles, which transmit sound, are located.

The Eustachian tube is its natural drainage route to the nose.

Otitis media is very common in children. It can also occur in adults. The usual cause is a nasal cold, an allergy or adenoids. This blocks the Eustachian tube and ear secretions become trapped inside the middle ear.

Symptoms: Earache, a feeling of fullness in the ear, hearing loss, general malaise, fever, headache, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. In infants, it causes irritability, crying and fever.

If fluid is draining from the ear, although this may relieve the pain, you should consult a healthcare professional.

Treatment: Consult your doctor. Treatment aims, above all, to manage the pain. Many cases of otitis media improve spontaneously; in some cases, depending on age, symptoms and the examination, an antibiotic may be necessary. For pain, ibuprofen or paracetamol is usually prescribed.

Gentle nasal rinses with saline solution every 6–8 hours help to clear the Eustachian tube. Perform the nasal rinses gently and avoid blowing your nose too hard.

Improvement usually occurs within about 3 days, but treatment may take longer. **Take the medication for the full duration prescribed by your doctor; do not stop taking it early.**

You may be referred to an ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist if the otitis media is recurrent or unresponsive to treatment, if adenoids need to be removed, if a drainage tube needs to be inserted into the eardrum, or whenever the doctor deems it appropriate.

Prevention: To prevent otitis media, it is recommended that you: **avoid smoking in a home with children and keep your vaccinations up to date.** Breastfeeding helps to prevent it in infants. If you need to use a bottle, avoid feeding the baby whilst they are lying completely flat.

