

Prevention and Treatment of Childhood Earaches

Otitis media, or inflammation of the middle ear, is one of the most common causes of earaches in infants and young children. By the age of 3, more than 2/3 have had at least one episode of otitis media, and 1/3 have had three or more episodes. The goal of naturopathic care is to safely and quickly remove the cause of inflammation and to prevent future problems by building a strong immune system.

What Causes Otitis Media?

Otitis media is more common during the winter when bacteria and viruses are out in full force and our natural resistance tends to be lowered by less exercise, fresh air, and fresh foods, along with being more exposed to cold and wet weather. Holiday indulgence of sweets is sometimes the last push into earaches.

The underlying problem occurs when diet, stress, food allergy/intolerance or inadequate early treatment of a minor cold or infection weakens the immune system. Often colds, tonsillitis, pneumonia, measles or mumps affect the auditory (eustachian) tubes, which in infants and young children are shorter and more horizontal than in older children and adults. The tube is easily blocked and can't drain to the back of the throat, so fluid builds up in the middle ear. This warm, moist environment leads to rapid growth of organisms and possible infection.

If otitis media is a chronic problem, allergies are the number one suspect. Allergies to common foods and/or inhalants are found in 85-90% of people with recurring otitis media. Some foods associated with otitis media are cow's milk, wheat, eggs, peanuts and corn. Fortunately, natural treatments have excellent long-term success by eliminating the cause of the problem and strengthening the immune system.

How to Detect Otitis Media

Under age 2:	Persistent crying, irritability, difficulty sleeping, fever
Over age 2:	Complaint of earache, fullness in ears, loss of hearing
At any age:	Tugging at ear, loss of hearing, ear pain, runny or stuffed nose, cough

Should Your Child be examined by a physician?

If your child is feverish and irritable, with or without ear pain, it is a good idea to make an appointment with your physician. Diagnosis of otitis media is made by looking into the ear canal at the tympanic membrane with an otoscope, as well as observing and asking questions about changes in behavior.

Naturopathic Treatment Options:

- **Alternating Hot & Cold Compresses:** Get a hand towel wet in as hot of water as your child can tolerate comfortably; soak another hand towel in a bowl of cold water with a few ice cubes in it. Wring out the wet hot towel and cover both ears, allowing the towel to fit snugly under the chin and up the sides of the neck. Hold in place for 3 minutes, then remove and repeat with the cold towel for 30 seconds. Repeat this cycle 3 times, ending with the cold towel. Repeat application 2-3 times a day.
- **Eustachian Tube Massage:** With one finger in front of the ear and one behind, with firm but comfortable pressure, slide the fingers down the neck, following the line of the prominent Sternocleidomastoid muscle, 3-5 times. Repeat several times a day.
- **Onion Poultice:** Cut an onion in half horizontally, reserve one half. Immerse onion in boiling water for 1-2 minutes until heated thru; remove carefully and allow to cool until it can be handled safely. Wrap half on onion in a thin tea towel or cloth and hold over child's ear for 15-20 minutes. Repeat 2-3 times a day. The same onion can be used for several applications.
- **Mullein & Garlic Ear Oil Drops/Homeopathic Earache Drops:** put several drops into affected ear (or both ears) and cover with a cotton ball twice daily.
**Important: if you are unsure whether or not the eardrum has ruptured, do not put anything in the ears—ruptured ear drums are fairly common with OM and are usually noted by a discharge from the ear and lessening of pain as the pressure is relieved.

Antibiotics – Are They Necessary?

Antibiotics are the first drug of choice for most pediatricians. Generally, they do not decrease the pain or duration of infection, but they do prevent other serious infections such as mastoiditis. The problem with antibiotics is the common side effects such as abdominal discomfort, stomach pain, toxicity to the kidneys, and immune system depression. Antibiotics kill both pathogenic and beneficial bacteria in the intestines, preventing normal function and leaving fertile ground for the overgrowth of harmful yeast such as candida. Those who do not receive antibiotics have less frequent recurrence of otitis media than those who do. The current belief is that antibiotics inhibit the immune system's ability to fight current and future infections.

Reference:

Murray, Michael ND and Pizzorno, Joseph ND, Encyclopedia of Natural Medicine, Revised 2nd Edition (Rocklin: Prima Publishing) 1998.