

Let's Take a Look

We examine ear infections, including “swimmer’s ear”

BY RACHEL RABKIN PECHMAN



NEXT TO colds, middle ear infections are the most common childhood illness in the United States. We made an appointment to speak with John Bent, M.D., to help you better understand this health issue. Dr. Bent is Director of Pediatric Otolaryngology - Head and Neck Surgery at Children’s Hospital at Montefiore Medical Center in New York City.

PARENT & CHILD: What typically causes an ear infection?

DR. JOHN BENT: They happen when the Eustachian tube [a passage that connects the middle ear to the back of the throat] becomes blocked, preventing air from flowing, which causes fluid and germs to become trapped. Children are prone to these infections because their Eustachian tubes are very narrow and lie more horizontally than an adult’s, making them easily blocked. Their immune systems are also immature, and they are encountering certain bacteria and viruses for the first time, which can cause frequent colds.

P&C: Is there any way to reduce the chance of ear infections?

DR. BENT: The only things proven to reduce ear infections are avoiding cigarette smoke (which irritates the ears and nose) and trying to cut down on exposure to germs. If you’re bottle-feeding, watch your baby’s position; when a baby is lying flat, milk may go up into her nose and irritate the Eustachian tube.

P&C: How are middle ear infections treated?

DR. BENT: The trend has been to wait to see if the infection gets better on its own before giving antibiotics, but this might

be changing. A major study recently found that antibiotics may be more effective than previously thought, and some doctors are choosing to use them more readily. It’s your doctor’s decision. In more severe cases, you may want to consider getting ear tubes for your child. These require a quick surgical procedure and are especially helpful for kids with recurrent infections (four to six times a year).

P&C: With summer here, kids are in the water more. Can you tell us about swimmer’s ear?

DR. BENT: It’s an outer infection of the ear canal that occurs when water gets trapped in it, causing bacteria to multiply. Symptoms include sharp pain, redness and swelling of the ear, and a pus discharge. It happens most in children older than 5 and is usually treated with antibiotic drops.

P&C: Is there any way to prevent swimmer’s ear?

DR. BENT: For those prone to the infection, I might recommend wearing earplugs and a bathing cap to keep water out of the ear and to use preventative drops after swimming. The drops are a mixture of white vinegar (which has antibacterial properties) and alcohol (which has a drying effect). **P&C**

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