

Avoiding middle ear infection in children

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Middle ear infection (otitis media) is very common among toddlers, with 50% of children having an episode before their first birthday and 80% of children having one by their third birthday.

What is it and why does it happen?

As the name suggests, middle ear infection involves inflammation of the ear drum and a build up of fluid in the middle ear. This is most commonly caused by bacteria or virus, often accompanied with upper respiratory tract infection.

First symptoms are persistent ear-ache and hearing loss, followed by fever and nausea with possible vomiting or diarrhoea. Babies may be irritable, and be difficult to feed and put to sleep. The rupture of the ear-drum creates pain but often relieves the pressure. When symptoms persist for more than 1-3 months, development into chronic serious otitis media ensues and effusion will become sticky. This is also known as "glue ear".

Why are children so prone?

Although middle ear infection occurs in many age groups, children from 6 months to 3 years are most affected. This can be attributed to immunological factors and simple anatomy (in relation to the nasopharynx, the Eustachian tube is at quite a low angle in young bodies). Other factors that may contribute include:

- * food allergies
- * antibiotic use
- * vaccination reactions
- * bottle-feeding
- * smoking in the household
- * poor nutrition

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- * family history
- * cleft palette

What to do?

It is often found that symptoms improve when certain dietary modifications are implemented, such as elimination of wheat, dairy, peanut butter and other common allergen-forming foods. Establishing a healthy gastro-intestinal function is imperative as gut function is intimately linked with immune regulation, neurological development, growth and hormone function. You can try help support your child's intestinal micro-flora balance with a probiotic formula that is designed for kids and contains strains that are specific to their needs. Also focus on improving their defence system and resistance to bacteria/viruses.

During the winter months it makes sense to take preventative measures, also. Cook hearty soups for dinner with immune-boosting root vegetables (puree for them if they prefer smooth than chunky), offer children sips of diluted warm herbal tea (not boiling hot) - and add a small amount of locally sourced honey. Ensure they eat good sources of vitamin C and include garlic in your family's meals as much as possible - nature's antibiotic.

If your child has a history of antibiotic use it really is vital to recolonise their gut flora with healthy bacteria, which will help enhance their digestion and absorption of nutrients. Digestive enzymes for kids are also useful. Unfortunately consuming yoghurt alone doesn't usually provide sufficient probiotics and ideally any gut-flora formula should be taken with prebiotic forming foods to help optimise the process. For more information on the intricacies of prebiotics vs probiotics, immune building and management of childhood illnesses, a Naturopathic consultation will arm you with the knowledge that might save you and your child the grief of any more nasty and often very painful ear infections.