

# Watchful Waiting for Ear Infections



**BE  
ANTIBIOTICS  
AWARE**

SMART USE, BEST CARE

Your child's ear infection may go away on its own, so your healthcare professional may suggest watching and waiting for 2-3 days to see if your child needs an antibiotic. **If so, you will not receive a prescription today.** Many ear infections will resolve on their own, and it's safer not to use antibiotics if they aren't needed.

To help your child feel better in the meantime, they should:

- Rest.

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- Drink extra water and fluids.

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- Use over-the-counter medicines as needed for relief of pain and fever:  
**Ibuprofen.** Dose and Frequency: \_\_\_\_\_  
**Acetaminophen.** Dose and Frequency: \_\_\_\_\_

If your child is feeling better over the next 2-3 days, no further treatment should be needed.

**Call your healthcare professional to discuss whether your child needs a recheck or antibiotics if your child does not feel better or still has ear pain after 2-3 days.**

**Call your healthcare professional right away if your child has any of the following:**

- Fever of 102.2°F (39°C) or higher.

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- Fluid draining from the ear.

Antibiotics should be used only when needed. When they aren't needed, they won't help your child, and the side effects could still cause harm. Common side effects include:

- Rashes
- Dizziness
- Nausea

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- Diarrhea
- Abdominal pain
- Diaper rashes

Antibiotics can save lives, and when your child needs antibiotics, the benefits usually outweigh the risks of side effects and antibiotic resistance, which occurs when bacteria develop the ability to defeat the drugs designed to kill them. Your healthcare professional will help you know when antibiotics are needed.

To learn more about antibiotic prescribing and use, visit [www.cdc.gov/antibiotic-use](http://www.cdc.gov/antibiotic-use) or call **1-800-CDC-INFO**.



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## What is an ear infection?

There are different types of ear infections. **Middle ear infection** (acute otitis media) is an infection in the middle ear, or behind the eardrum.

## What does the term “watchful waiting” mean?

It means observing your child for 2–3 days to give your child’s immune system time to fight off the infection rather than starting antibiotics immediately. Your healthcare professional will wait to see if your child gets better before giving your child a prescription for antibiotics.

## Why would my healthcare professional recommend watchful waiting instead of giving antibiotics immediately?

Studies have shown that most children with mild ear infections get better without antibiotics. The child’s immune system is often able to fight off the infection on its own. Antibiotics can sometimes improve symptoms more quickly, but antibiotics can also cause problems, such as side effects and antibiotic resistance. **Two out of 3 children with mild ear infections get better without receiving any antibiotics.**

## Which children qualify for watchful waiting?

Children between ages 6 months and 23 months if only one ear is infected, and who have:

**OR**

Children ages 2 years and older if one or both ears are infected, and who have:

- Symptoms of ear infection that have lasted less than 2 days.
- Mild ear pain
- Temperature lower than 102.2°F (39°C)

## How can I improve my child’s symptoms if I don’t give antibiotics?

The symptoms of an ear infection—like ear pain and fever—can be helped with ibuprofen or acetaminophen, rest, and extra fluids.

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