

Ear Infections: Otitis Media With Effusion

What is otitis media with effusion?

Otitis media with effusion means that there is fluid in the middle (inner) ear and that the inner ear is inflamed (swollen). (Effusion is another word for fluid.) This fluid usually doesn't bother children. It almost always goes away on its own. So, this kind of ear problem doesn't have to be treated with antibiotics, unless the fluid doesn't go away.

What causes otitis media with effusion?

Fluid may build up in the middle ear for 2 reasons. First, when a child has a cold, the middle ear may produce fluid just like the nose does, but the fluid doesn't drain out of the middle ear as easily as it does from the nose. Second, children who have a "regular" ear infection could have otitis media with effusion the next time, if the fluid stays in the middle ear for a long time.

How is otitis media with effusion treated?

The best treatment is to let the fluid go away by itself.

Are antibiotics ever needed for an ear infection with fluid?

Yes. If the fluid is still there after a few months and is causing hearing loss or problems in both ears, antibiotics may help some children. For this reason, your child's ears should be checked a few months after an ear infection. If the fluid is still there, a hearing test may be the next step.

Why not just try antibiotics right now?

Giving your child unnecessary antibiotics can be harmful. After each course of antibiotics, the germs in the nose and throat are more likely to become resistant. Resistant germs can't be killed by the usual antibiotics. More expensive and powerful antibiotics have to be used. Some of these antibiotics must be given in the hospital and their side effects can be very unpleasant or even dangerous. Since fluid in the ears doesn't usually bother children, it's better to wait and only give antibiotics when they're necessary.

Source

[Appropriate Use of Antibiotics for URIs in Children: Part I. Otitis Media and Acute Sinusitis](http://www.aafp.org/afp/981001ap/dowell.html)
(*American Family Physician* October 1, 1998, <http://www.aafp.org/afp/981001ap/dowell.html>)

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This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

