

## **Chronic Otitis Media (Ear Infections)**

### **What is Chronic Otitis Media?**

Otitis media is an inflammation or infection of the middle ear. Chronic means recurring or persistent.

### **Causes**

Inflammation or infection of the middle ear occurs when the eustachian tube to that ear is blocked. The eustachian tube is the passage from the back of the nose to the middle ear. Chronic otitis media occurs when the eustachian tube becomes blocked repeatedly (or remains blocked for long periods) due to allergies, multiple infections, ear trauma, or swelling of the adenoids.

When the middle ear is actually infected with bacteria (or occasionally, viruses) rather than just inflamed, it is more serious. A chronic ear infection may be the result of an acute ear infection that does not clear completely, or the result of recurrent ear infections. The infection may spread into the mastoid bone behind the ear (mastoiditis), or pressure from fluid build-up may rupture the eardrum or damage the bones of the middle ear.

A chronic ear infection may be more destructive than an acute ear infection because its effects are prolonged or repeated, and it may cause permanent damage to the ear. However, a chronic, long-term infection may show less severe symptoms - so the infection may remain unnoticed and untreated for a long time.

Ear infections are more common in children because their eustachian tubes are shorter, narrower, and more horizontal than in adults. Chronic ear infections are much less common than acute ear infections.

### **Treatment**

Treatment is focused on relief of symptoms and cure of the infection. Antibiotics may be prescribed if the infection appears bacterial. Antibiotic treatment is usually long-term and may be oral or in the form of antibiotic ear drops if there is a hole in the eardrum.

Surgical removal of the adenoids may be necessary to allow the eustachian tube to open. A surgical opening may be made in the eardrum (myringotomy) to allow fluid to drain. This may or may not include placement of drainage tubes in the ear. Surgical repair of a ruptured eardrum may prevent further chronic ear infections.

Keep the ears clean and dry to prevent reinfection. This is particularly important if myringotomy has been performed.

Permanent hearing loss is rare, but the risk increases the more infections a child has.

## **Prevention**

Prompt treatment of acute ear infections may reduce the risk of development of chronic otitis media. Follow-up examination after treatment of an ear infection will ensure that it is completely cured.