Ear Infections:

Break the Vicious Cycle

NEED-TO-KNOW INFORMATION FOR PREVENTION AND PAIN RELIEF

Stacelynn Caughian, C.I.N., CH, CBC

Another sleepless night. Your little one is miserable, and you fear the cause is yet another ear infection. For many young children, ear infections become recurrent and difficult to avoid. Although prevention is the best medicine, there are many natural solutions to the pain and discomfort your child experiences. With patience and diligence, you can break the cycle!

Inside the ear

The ear is divided into three parts. The outer ear is the area most visible. Sound travels through the ear canal, past the ear drum to the middle ear, the bones of which transmit sound to the inner ear.

The middle ear houses the eustachian tube, which connects to the nose and throat, and allows drainage of fluids collected in the middle ear. In infants and young children, the eustachian tube is shorter and lies more horizontally (over time it will develop a more downward angle). This position makes it harder for
inside the ear

Earsaches commonly occur when the eustachian tubes become blocked, which prevents fluid from draining out of the tube. Fluid in the middle ear provides a good place for an infection to start. Infection with blockage increases pressure behind the eardrum, causing much of the pain. The eustachian tubes can become blocked because of allergies, a cold or other infection.

Remedies

Ear drops
Instructions for ear drops: Place one to two drops of warmed oil into the ears three to four times a day.

Ear drops #1: garlic oil
Place two or three cloves of chopped garlic into a double boiler or small saucepan. Cover with just enough olive oil and heat gently for 20 to 30 minutes. Strain and bottle. Keep in the refrigerator. Has antifungal and antibacterial properties.

Ear drops #2: mullein oil
Follow the above recipe using three to four tablespoons (45 to 60 millilitres) of dried or fresh mullein leaves and/or flowers. Reduces inflammation and relieves pain.

Ear drops #3: St. John’s wort oil
Place the buds of unopened flowers into just enough olive oil to cover. Seal the jar tightly and place in sunny window for at least two weeks. Strain and keep in the refrigerator. Relieves pain and acts as an anti-inflammatory.

Onion poultice
Cut a thick slab of yellow onion and warm it in an oven or boiling water. When cool enough to handle, wrap it in cheesecloth and hold on the affected ear. When the onion has cooled, remove and reheat for another application. Relieves pain and promotes circulation.

Massage oil
Add three drops each of lavender, Roman chamomile and tea tree essential oils to two tablespoons (30 ml) of grapeseed oil. Mix well and massage a few drops at a time around the outside of the ear. Relieves pain and acts as an antimicrobial.

Note: Especially useful if the ear drum has ruptured and internal drops are not appropriate.

Herbal tea
Make a blend of the following dried herbs, which are available at many health food stores: lemon balm, catnip, ginger, licorice, spearmint and chamomile. Pour four cups (one litre) of boiling water over three teaspoons (15 ml) of the blend. Cover and let sit for 10 minutes. Infants take one-half teaspoon (2.5 ml) of tea diluted with one-half teaspoon (2.5 ml) of water, three to four times a day. Older children: approximately one-quarter cup (60 ml), three to four times a day. Tea should be warm but not hot.
excess fluid to drain properly. Should this tube become blocked, infection can readily develop in the middle ear and trap fluids. The eustachian tube can become blocked by congestion caused by a cold or other upper respiratory infection, or by a reaction to a food or environmental allergen.

If your child has ear pain or hearing loss, is unable to lie flat, wakes frequently at night, is extremely fussy, has a fever, or has fluid draining from his/her ear, see a physician. A proper diagnosis will give you more confidence in choosing the appropriate remedies.

**Natural pain relief**

Your child may experience pain relief from a warm compress placed over the affected ear. Dip a soft cloth in very warm water or tea and wring it out. When it is cool enough to touch, place it over the ear. You can also use a heat pack filled with flax seeds, buckwheat or rice. These tend to maintain their heat longer and are less messy than a wet cloth. Essential oils of lavender, Roman chamomile and/or tea tree can be added to the water or dropped onto the heat pack.

Massaging around the ear can help fluid drain into the eustachian tube and provide some pain relief. This can be done with or without oil, but if a massage oil is used, consider adding essential oils (see recipe). Massage along the back of the ear down toward the jawline in repeated strokes. Discontinue if it causes your child any pain. If the lymph nodes (glands) are swollen, massage them lightly using the same essential oil blend to help them drain and to relieve discomfort.

If pain is caused by congestion, particularly from a cold, keep the mucus thinned by having your child drink very warm herbal teas such as lemon balm, catnip, spearmint, ginger and/or licorice root. A vaporizer used in the room where your child sleeps or some time

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**ANTIBIOTIC OVERUSE**

When you visit your family doctor about an ear infection, flu or other ailment, chances are high that you will receive a prescription for antibiotics. They've been the popular treatment of many health problems since the 1940s, when they came on the market as one of the biggest advancements in medicine. But we are now discovering that antibiotics have dangerous side-effects and that their overuse has helped create highly resistant bacteria that wipe out the body's "good" bacteria. The result: many bacterial infections are more difficult to treat than ever, including ear and skin infections, pneumonia and urinary tract infections.
spent in a steamy bathroom before bed can help, too. Try adding lavender essential oil to the vaporizer, or eucalyptus oil if your child is over the age of two.

Prop your child's head up at a 30-degree angle while she's lying down. This encourages drainage and discourages any feeling of pressure. Adjust the upper portion of the bed so that it slopes down toward her feet by placing something under the mattress or the bed legs.

**Preventing infection**

Natural remedies can be very effective at curbing an ear infection, but a strong, healthy immune system is even better. The best ways to eliminate the bacteria causing the infection are to stimulate the child's own immune defences and to use natural microbials. Because many infections are precipitated by a viral infection attacking the respiratory system, this approach will cover all bases.

Be sure the child's diet is free of refined and/or concentrated sugars (e.g., table sugar, corn syrup) and low in naturally occurring sugars such as those in fruit juices. Sugar is known to lower the body's resistance to infection. It also feeds the yeast that may be triggering the infections in the first place. If your child is dealing with a severe yeast infection as determined by a qualified health-care practitioner, it is especially important to make the necessary dietary changes.

Vegetable proteins such as beans, peas and nuts, as well as whole grains, colourful fruits and vegetables and adequate water/fluids should make up the bulk of your child's diet. When an ear infection is present, avoid pasteurized dairy and cheese products because these encourage mucus formation.

For a child under eight months, breastmilk should still be the primary source of calories. Breastfeeding has been clinically proven to reduce the risk of ear infections. It is best to continue nursing until your child is weaned naturally, which could be two years or more. Breastmilk is also a convenient carrier for many of the following suggested remedies. The nursing mother can take an adult dose and pass on the benefits via her breastmilk.

Echinacea stimulates the white blood cells that are necessary for eliminating pathogens. Children prone to chronic ear infections have benefited from continual use of echinacea throughout the cold and flu season with a one week break out of every four. Otherwise, a dose at the first sign of symptoms and every three to four hours thereafter may prevent the problem from
progressing. Choose a children’s glycerite (alcohol-free) formula and follow the instructions on the bottle. Seek professional advice on higher dosages for acute infection.

Zinc supplements also boost the immune system. For children old enough to chew, zinc lozenges are very convenient. Some varieties contain echinacea or other immune-boosting remedies. Up to 30 milligrams per day is needed for acute illness and five to 10 mg on a regular basis.

Vitamin C increases the immune response and is an anti-inflammatory. Children’s chewable and liquid vitamin C supplements are available. Be sure to brush their teeth afterward, as this acidic vitamin can erode tooth enamel. Most children tolerate 100 to 500 mg a day during illness. If your child develops loose stools (a sign of excess), decrease dosage. Watch for signs of dehydration should this last for more than one day.

Garlic is surprisingly well tolerated by little tastebuds if they are introduced to it early in life. Breastfed babies can taste garlic in mom’s breastmilk after she eats this potent anti-microbial herb. For smaller children, and older ones who might refuse to eat it, rub infused garlic oil (see recipe) onto the soles of the feet, where it’s readily absorbed into the body.

Allergens

Second-hand smoke has been proven to increase a child’s risk of ear infections. Seasonal allergies (hay fever) and sensitivities to pollen, mould, pet dander, dust and food proteins may also trigger recurring ear infections. The immune system’s response to foreign invaders usually results in inflammatory congestion that can block the eustachian tubes. Because the body is so busy trying to ward off “invaders,” it’s incapable of appropriately dealing with bacterial overgrowth that may occur in the middle ear’s warm, moist environment. Keep your child’s environment reasonably free of allergens by installing an air filter as well as using hypoallergenic materials such as organic cotton sheets and pillowcases. Clean often with natural cleansers such as baking soda and vinegar. Never smoke around your children.

Food allergies must be identified and avoided until the body is strong enough to resist an inappropriate immune response. Common culprits include homogenized and pasteurized dairy products, soy, wheat, corn, eggs and oranges. It’s best to work with a practitioner
who can help you identify problematic foods while still ensuring a healthy diet. Be wary of practitioners who put nursing moms or small children on very restrictive elimination diets. This can sometimes do more harm than good, and compliance is minimal after a short while.

**Probiotics**

Ear infections are one of the most common reasons why antibiotics are prescribed to children. But a subsequent side-effect can be the proliferation of yeast (candida) in the body. Yeast infections may leave the immune system weakened and vulnerable, and a child more susceptible to ear infections—hence the vicious cycle.

Yeast infections cause an imbalance in the intestinal flora required to properly digest food and protect the body from pathogenic growth. It's important to replace missing flora with fermented foods such as kefir and yogurt as well as probiotics such as acidophilus. Most children will benefit from daily supplementation.

Breastmilk also supports the growth of intestinal flora, thereby enhancing the immune system. Breastfeeding supplies important immune-enhancing substances, further reduces the risk of developing allergies by protecting the intestines (leaky intestines allow more foreign material into the bloodstream) and contributes to appropriate physical development of the c ustachian tubes.

Luckily, there are ways of breaking the vicious cycle. Some solutions, such as becoming more aware of food allergens, take time and persistence. Others may provide more immediate relief until the "big picture" can be seen clearly and addressed.
