

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Patrick Ryan, DC

End Childhood Ear Infections

Here is a familiar scenario for parents of young children: Your child is feverish, irritable and pulling at her ear. She may complain that her ear hurts. Off you go to the pediatrician, who peers into your child's ear, declares it infected, and hands you a prescription for a 10-day round of antibiotics. It's the third ear infection your child has had this year, and as you coax her to take the medicine and dread the stomach upset it may bring, you wonder if there is another way.

Yes, there is, says Dr. Ryan. Antibiotics shouldn't be the first line of defense against a simple ear infection. Read on to learn about the natural chiropractic approach to alleviating ear infections — and preventing them from occurring in the first place.



A Familiar Problem

Ear infections are quite common in babies and young children — fever and ear pain often come on the heels of a cold or other respiratory infection.

The typical childhood ear infection is *otitis media*, an infection of the middle ear. Swelling from the initial infection backs up the eustachian tubes that normally drain fluid, creating an ideal environment for bacteria or viruses to flourish. The build-up of infected fluid sometimes causes the eardrum to burst, resulting in a discharge from the ear.

Because young children have shorter, more horizontal eustachian tubes and less mature immune systems, they are much more prone to ear infections than older children and adults. By the age of seven, 93 percent of children will have at least one bout of otitis media, making it the most common reason for visits to the pediatrician (*Pediatrics* 2003;111:e574-9).

Though it is uncomfortable, an ear infection is usually a minor illness. Chronic ear infections may be a greater concern, because they can affect hearing and thus speech development.

The “Wait-and-See” Approach

Many ear infections are caused by viruses — not bacteria — and are not affected by antibiotics. So it is important to have your child's doctor test if the condition is bacterial or viral before even considering antibiotics.

Dr. Ryan agrees with many experts who now suggest a “wait-and-see” period for mild or moderate ear infections. Often, otitis media clears up on its own in a few days. This allows the child to avoid an unnecessary round of antibiotics, a move that has several advantages.

Overuse of antibiotics can lead to the development of drug-resistant strains of bacteria. Many children experience stomach upset and diarrhea while taking antibiotics. This is because antibiotics kill off the beneficial bacteria in their digestive tracts. Antibiotic use also ups the risk of developing future diseases, including breast cancer and gastrointestinal disorders.

A cautious approach to antibiotics appears to work well for many children. In a study of 1,099 children with symptoms of ear infection, 67.6 percent recovered within three days without taking antibiotics, and none ex-

perienced complications (*Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med* 2005;159:679-84).

Another trial randomly assigned 415 children with otitis media to receive amoxicillin (a common antibiotic for ear infections) or a placebo. Two weeks later, 84.2 percent of the children receiving the placebo had no symptoms compared to 92.8 percent of those who took the antibiotic. There was no difference in recurrence of ear infection in the two groups (*CMAJ* 2005;172:335-41).

Chiropractic Care

Some children have *vertebral subluxations* — misalignments of the vertebrae, or spinal bones — acquired during the birth process or by other means.

Doctors of chiropractic, like Dr. Ryan correct these dysfunctions with gentle maneuvers called *chiropractic adjustments*.

Chiropractic adjustments effectively realign the bones of the head, neck and back.

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Adjusting a mild subluxation in the back of the skull or the neck can help fluid drain from the middle ear and make a huge difference for a child who suffers from ear infections.

Research findings on the efficacy of chiropractic care for pediatric ear infections are promising. In one trial, a chiropractor adjusted subluxations in 46 children with ear infections. He focused on correcting misalignments in the occiput (back of the skull) and cervical vertebrae (neck bones). Ninety-three percent of patients improved, and 43 percent only required one or two sessions (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 1996;19:169-77).

Another report demonstrated that chiropractic care can help a child avert recurrent infections. Out of 332 children aged five and under who received care, only 11 percent had another ear infection within the next six months.

The investigation found “a strong correlation between the chiropractic adjustment and the resolution of otitis media.” (*JCCP* 1997;2:167-183.)

Chiropractic is Safe for Kids

Chiropractic is a form of complementary and alternative medicine most often chosen by parents for their children (*Chiropr Osteopat* 2010;18:16).

Parents like chiropractic because it helps children maintain optimal health safely by favoring spine care, sound nutrition and other preventive measures over using drugs to treat problems after they arise.

The doctor understands the unique structure of the young spine. A newborn’s spine reacts to extremely mild pressure during a chiropractic adjustment, while a growing child’s spine is still composed of mostly cartilage and requires a lighter touch compared to the adult spine. Chiropractic education emphasizes modification of technique to safely care for patients of all ages (*Chiropr Osteopat* 2010;18:16).

Adverse events — or unexpected side effects — from chiropractic adjustments on children are extremely rare. A survey of chiropractors and parents of pediatric patients uncovered just three adverse events over 5,438 office visits — that’s a rate of 0.0006 percent (*Explore [NY]* 2009;5:290-5).

On the other hand, one study of prescriptions ordered for children found an adverse event rate of 0.24 percent (*JAMA* 2001;285:2114-20).

Other Natural Remedies

There are other non-drug techniques that parents can use alongside chiropractic care to ease a child’s ear infection. Naturopathic ear drops are avail-

able to ease pain, and a double-blind trial found them to be as effective as conventional anesthetic ear drops (*Pediatrics* 2003;111:e574-9).

Another natural remedy is nasal spray containing extract of the herb cyclamen europaeum, which has been shown effective in treating both sinusitis and otitis media (*Vestn Otorinolaringol* 2010;4:74-7).

Garlic extract or oil is an old-fashioned remedy worth investigating for its natural bactericidal properties (*Int J Pediatr Otorhinolaryngol* 1999;49:S15-7).

A healthy diet contains all the nutrients needed for the body’s natural immunity to function at its highest level and fight off disease. Increased levels of certain nutrients through either food or supplements can give the immune system a boost when illness does strike. The doctor may recommend specific nutritional supplements outlined below. However, do not start any supplement without first talking to the doctor.

Two fatty acids, DHA and ARA, are effective at reducing young children’s rates of ear infections as well as respiratory infections and asthma (*J Pediatr* 2010;156:902-6).

Zinc supplementation may also reduce likelihood of developing otitis media (*Cochrane Database Syst Rev* 2010;17:CD006639).

Finally, probiotic supplementation cut ear infection rates in half for a group of children in a recent Swedish study (*Caries Res* 2009;43:374-81).



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