

Ear Infections

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

Karen's three-year-old daughter woke up crying and complaining that her ear hurt, again. She was running a fever, again.

The following morning the doctor confirmed what Karen already knew. Her daughter had an ear infection, again. Three in one year. Was this typical?

Well, yes. Recurring ear infections are not uncommon. Middle ear infection – otitis media – is the second most common childhood illness. Colds, rank number one.

Most children get an ear infection before age three. Many get several throughout childhood.

Nevertheless, Karen was right to see a doctor. It is important to detect and treat ear infections early to avoid serious complications, such as hearing loss.

Colds and other conditions that may cause the Eustachian tube to become blocked are often the culprits. When the tube is blocked, fluid builds up in the middle ear. When the fluid becomes infected by a virus or bacteria, swelling, pressure behind the eardrum, and pain are often the results.

Some experts believe ear infections are common in children because their immune systems have not yet matured. Others say it is because the Eustachian tube is narrower and less effective in young children.

Allergies and exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke increase the risk of ear infections. So does bottle feeding. Also, attending school and group childcare exposes children to more colds and other viruses.

You should call your doctor if your child complains of ear pain. If the ear is infected, an antibiotic may be prescribed. For pain, your doctor may recommend children's Tylenol or children's Motrin. Placing a warm, wet compress or a heating pad on a painful ear may help comfort a child.

If your child suffers from frequent ear infections, you may take some comfort knowing that they often become much less common after a child reaches five or six years of age.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.