



Otitis Media with Effusion (fluid in the middle ear)

Your child has been diagnosed with otitis media with effusion (OME), which means that he has some fluid in the middle ear. Fluid usually does not bother children and it almost always goes away on its own. So this kind of ear infection does not have to be treated with antibiotics unless it persists. Here are some facts about ear infections and OME:

What kinds of ear infections are there?

There are several types of ear infections. For example, otitis externa (swimmer's ear) is an infection of the ear canal which can be painful and is treated with ear drops. Acute otitis media (AOM) is another infection which may cause ear pain, fever, or an inflamed eardrum, and is treated with oral antibiotics. Your child does not have these. She has fluid in the middle ear (OME), which usually does not need antibiotics.

What causes OME?

Fluid may build up in the middle ear for two reasons. When a child has a cold the middle ear may produce fluid just as the nose does - it just doesn't run out as easily from the middle ear. Second, children who have recently had acute otitis media (AOM) may get OME because of the length of time fluid stays in the middle ear.

How is OME treated?

The best treatment is watchful waiting. Since children are not bothered by OME, letting the fluid go away on its own gives the best chance for your child's complete recovery.

Are antibiotics ever needed for OME?

Yes, if the fluid is still present after a few months and is causing decreased hearing in both ears antibiotics may help some children. For this reason, your child will need an ear check in a few months. If fluid is still present, a hearing test may be needed.

Why not just try antibiotics now?

Unnecessary antibiotics can be harmful. After each course of antibiotics, children are more likely to carry resistant germs in their noses and throats. These resistant germs are not killed by the usual antibiotics. When children get infections with resistant germs it may be more difficult to cure the infection. Children may need more expensive antibiotics, antibiotics by needle, or even antibiotics in hospital. Since OME doesn't usually bother children, it is better to wait and give antibiotics when they are needed.

What should I do?

Be glad that your child has a very mild condition that will probably get better by itself. On your next routine visit, the doctor should be able to tell you if the fluid has gone away. Or, you may schedule an appointment in a few months to be sure the fluid is gone. Right now, no medicines are needed and no special precautions need to be taken.