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Earache relief: medicine and remedies

We all get earache from time to time, and while it's no fun, this common problem is usually minor, often clearing without the need for treatment over a few days. But a painful ear can be very uncomfortable, and there are earache relief methods you can use at home that also speed along recovery.

We outline the medicines and home remedies to help some of the most common earache problems - and when you need to see a doctor.

What earache relief is right for you?

Earache, also called otalgia, can feel like a sharp pain, a dull ache, or a burning sensation, and can range from mildly discomforting to very painful.

If your pain is significant and disrupting your day-to-day, it's always best to see your doctor. They'll be able to diagnose and treat many problems in your ear. Most cases of earache, though, are minor and may be treated with pharmacy medicines and home remedies.

Here we look at your options for earache relief, depending on the cause of your pain:

1. [Ear infections](#) - ear infections in your middle ear.
2. Ear injuries.
3. [Impacted earwax](#).
4. [Swimmer's ear](#) - infections in your ear canal - part of your outer ear.
5. Airplane ear.

For ear infections in your middle ear

An ear infection in your middle ear is also known as otitis media. These infections are behind your ear drum. When the eustachian tube (the tube that connects your ear to the back of your nose and throat) becomes blocked – often due to bacteria, viruses from colds or flu, or allergies – this causes swelling and mucus to build up. This mucus can become infected, leading to symptoms such as pain, [hearing loss](#), and leaking fluid if the ear drum bursts.

Ear infections are common – especially among children. In fact, five out of six children will have had at least one ear infection by age three¹. But most ear infections clear up on their own in a day or two without treatment.

The first step is usually to treat an ear infection at home – and medicines can also ease earache and help you recover. If your symptoms don't improve in two or three days, the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) recommends you see a doctor².

Home remedies

- Use a warm compress – a warm damp washcloth held against the infected ear for up to 20 minutes can help relieve pain.
- Gargle saltwater – adding one teaspoon of table salt to one cup of warm water and gargling it for a couple minutes can reduce inflammation in your ear – this shouldn't be tried in children who may swallow rather than gargle.
- Get plenty of rest – this helps your immune system fight infections. While sleeping, do not lie on the affected ear.

Medicine

- Pharmacy [painkillers](#) – medicines like paracetamol or ibuprofen can provide earache relief. Not all medicines are safe for all ages, so if treating your child, make sure you give them the correct amount for their age. Ask your pharmacist for advice.
- [Decongestants](#) and/or [antihistamines](#) – may speed up recovery by helping to reduce swelling and allowing fluid to drain out your ear.

- **Antibiotics** – if your symptoms persist for more than a day or two, a doctor may prescribe you a course of antibiotics, if bacteria caused the infection.

For ear injuries

Any injury to the ear – for example from contact sports, falling over, loud noises, or from objects pushed in the ear – may cause pain, as well as other problems like balance issues and hearing loss.

The correct treatment depends on what part of your ear is injured and the problems it causes. Minor injuries can heal on their own with the help of home and pharmacy earache relief, but others may require stitches, surgery, hearing aids, or object removal by a healthcare professional.

If you or your child experience severe pain, dizziness, hearing loss, or bleeding, see a doctor as soon as possible.

Home remedies

- If your ear is bleeding – wrap a sterile dressing around the ear and tape it loosely in place, before seeking medical attention.
- Apply an ice pack – lightly holding an ice pack to the area may help to limit swelling.

Medicine

- Pharmacy painkillers – for earache relief, ask your pharmacist for the most effective and suitable.
- Creams – for minor cuts and scratches to the outer ear, your pharmacist may recommend creams to heal the area.
- Antibiotics – if your ear injury leads to an ear infection caused by bacteria entering the ear, your doctor may prescribe antibiotics.
- Avoid eardrops in pharmacies – unless your doctor says they're okay to use. This is because some eardrops are not safe if your eardrum has **ruptured**.

Anything in your ear will need to be removed by a doctor. This may involve going to A&E if needed.

Remember - cotton buds should never be used inside your ear.

For impacted earwax

Everyone has earwax - a yellow substance that prevents germs, dust, water, and other irritants from entering your ear. However, earwax can become compacted and block the ear canal, leading to earache, hearing loss, and balance issues. This usually happens when you stick objects in your ear, like cotton buds/Q tips or fingers, which pushes and lodges earwax deep inside - nothing should ever go into your ear.

Home remedies

Most methods for removing ear wax yourself at home are **now considered dangerous**, because they could make the problem worse, cause ear injuries, or even result in permanent damage and hearing loss.

Unsafe methods:

- Avoid ear candles - putting a pointed-tipped candle inside your ear and lighting the other end to melt ear wax is unsafe because the hot candle wax can block the ear, burn your skin, or even attach to the eardrum and cause permanent damage.
- Avoid cotton buds/Q-tips - sticking these objects, or any other things, inside your ear can puncture your eardrum and cause permanent damage. They're also highly ineffective, as they tend to push wax further into your ear.

Medicine

- Wax softening ear drops - are available from your pharmacy and may contain medical-grade olive oil, almond oil, sodium chloride, and sodium bicarbonate.

If ear drops don't work after the time period given on the instructions, there are a couple of methods your doctor or nurse may use to draw out the ear wax. Ear irrigation, which pumps water into your ear to flush out wax, and microsuction, which uses gentle suction to draw out wax, are **both considered safe - although there are some risks**. While these methods are widely used across the UK, bear in mind that not every GP surgery provides them, in which case you will be referred to a clinic that does.

Swimmer's ear

Swimmer's ear is a popular name for an **outer ear infection**, or otitis externa. So-called because it's often caused by swimming, the infection occurs when water gets trapped in the outer part of the ear canal. If it does not drain out, this water grows bacteria or other bugs and results in earache and other symptoms. It usually goes away on its own within a few days.

Home remedies

- Use a warm compress - a warm damp washcloth held against the infected ear for up to 20 minutes can help relieve pain.
- Make a solution of rubbing alcohol (isopropyl alcohol) and vinegar - combining one part rubbing alcohol and one part vinegar and putting a couple of drops in the ear can help trapped water evaporate and prevent bacteria from growing. This home remedy is also recommended as a preventative measure for people who often get swimmer's ear, when applied before and after swimming. It's considered safe, so long as you do not have a punctured eardrum.

There are also things you shouldn't do with swimmer's ear. Don't:

- Swim or scuba dive.
- Wear earplugs, earbuds, or hearing aids.
- Get more water in your ear while showering or bathing.
- As above, stick cotton buds/Q tips or any other objects in your ear.

Medicine

- Pharmacy painkillers - for earache relief, ask your pharmacist for the most effective and suitable.

- Pharmacy ear drops – are available without prescription to ease itchiness.
- Prescription ear drops – if your symptoms persist and are disrupting your day to day, a pharmacist or doctor may prescribe corticosteroid eardrops to reduce swelling. If swimmer's ear leads to infection, they may prescribe antibiotic, acidic, or antifungal ear drops.

If your ear or your face is red or swollen or the part behind your ear feels swollen and tender– this could indicate an infection that is spreading. In this case, you should go to A&E – especially if you are very hot (**fever**).

Airplane ear

On airplanes – or while scuba diving – the inside and outside of the ear is affected by sudden air pressure differences, caused by the rapid changes in altitude. Here, air can suddenly enter or exit the middle ear, creating pressure that may cause the eardrum to bulge outward or push inward. You may feel pain, and your hearing might be muffled.

Home remedies

There are self-care steps, or immediate home remedies, you can do in the moment to counter the differences in air pressure and relieve your symptoms.

- Equalise – this is a breathing technique that involves closing your mouth, pinching your nose with your fingers, and then gently blowing out your nose against the pressure of the fingers until your ears pop. All scuba divers learn this technique, and you can also use it whenever you need to on flights – usually during take off and landing.
- Move your jaw – yawning, chewing something, swallowing, or opening and closing your mouth can all help counter changes in air pressure and associated earache.

Medicine

For most people, this sensation is temporary, but earache can occasionally persist – even when you're back on land.

- Pharmacy painkillers – for earache relief, ask your pharmacist for the most effective and suitable.
- Decongestants and/or antihistamines – come in the form of nasal sprays or tablets. These can be used as a preventative treatment, for people who are prone to airplane ear or who must fly while congested. Some need to be taken 30 minutes before take-off and landing to help shrink swollen nasal passages. Always read the instructions or ask your pharmacist.

For severe cases of airplane ear, symptoms won't go away on their own. You'll need a doctor to assess if serious damage has occurred in the ear. In very rare cases, surgery may be needed.

When to see a doctor

You can often ease earache and manage other uncomfortable symptoms yourself – but sometimes earache is a sign of an issue that needs more medical attention. See your doctor if you have²:

- Pain that's affecting your daily life.
- Earache and other symptoms that last for more than a few days.
- Significant hearing loss.
- A ringing sensation in your ears.
- A high temperature.
- Problems with your balance
- Facial muscle paralysis.
- Symptoms that become worse over time.
- Any redness or swelling to your actual ear or face.
- Any swelling or 'bogginess' to the bony part behind your ear (mastoid tenderness) – this needs to be seen in A&E immediately.

Further reading

1. [National Institute on Deafness and other ear disorders: Ear infections in children.](#)

2. Centers for Disease Prevention and Control: Ear infection.

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Authored by: Amberley Davis	Peer Reviewed by: Dr Krishna Vakharia, MRCGP	
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