

9 COMMON EAR PROBLEMS SOLVED

EAR CARE IS CRUCIAL FOR GOOD QUALITY OF LIFE AND IF NOT DEALT WITH APPROPRIATELY, COMMON EAR PROBLEMS CAN HAVE PROFOUND CONSEQUENCES FOR ALL AGE GROUPS.

Ear problems are very common and are something that you will see in pharmacy quite often: mainly people complaining about wax in their ears, common presentations such as swimmer's ear, blocked ears, buzzing, ear ache; also and children are also particularly prevalent to ear problems, with if not resolved, can actually lead to social and learning difficulties.

People do all sorts of weird things to clear their ears: using the dreaded cotton buds or paper clips, hot compasses, but worst of all candling, to remove wax buildup in their ears. Pharmacy assistants need to know how to give clear advice.

Here are the most common ear problems you will probably encounter:

OTIS MEDIA (OM):

Also known as your common, everyday middle ear infection, this condition is common in infants and young children, especially in indigenous populations.

"It's often linked to the common cold and flu," explains Doctor William Mooney, leading ear, nose and throat surgeon. "Symptoms include earache and fever and sometimes, temporary loss of hearing (due to the fluid in the ear making it difficult for sound to travel)."

The child could also suffer headaches, ear discharge, itchiness, dizziness and loss of balance, blisters along the ear canal or in the outer ear, loss of appetite and disrupted sleep patterns.

"Abdominal pain has also been associated with this condition," adds Dr Mooney.

It's happening because the illness-related infection has caused pus or fluid to build up behind the eardrum. Sometimes, the eardrum will burst, which relieves the pain and makes the child feel better.

"This usually heals in time and but it does require medical review, to ensure the perforation has closed," stresses Dr Mooney. "If it is a mild case, the problem can be left to clear up without medical help, but if the child is in pain, a visit to the family GP is a must; antibiotics could be on the cards."

GLUE EAR:

In very severe cases of Otis Media, the ear fills up with thick fluid, which consists of pus from the infection. This is known as Glue Ear.

"If antibiotics fail to work, we can perform a simple operation to remedy the problem," explains Dr Mooney. "We make a small hole and insert a grommet to drain the fluid. Often it is a case of using an injection of a really strong antibiotic."

Like otitis media, glue ear is something children tend to grow out of.

INFECTIOUS MYRINGITIS:

This is basically inflammation of the eardrum and either a bacterial or viral infection is to blame. It can be painful and it may produce blisters. If the customer presents with a fever, it usually indicates that the infection is a bacterial one. You can offer pain-relieving medications, but the best advice would be to suggest that your customer see their GP and undergo a course of antibiotics.

ACUTE MASTOIDITIS:

This is the infection of the bone that sits behind the ear – the mastoid bone and is caused by acute otitis. The skin covering the bone will become red and swollen and the customer/patient will be suffering fever, intense pain and discharge from the ear. It's a very serious condition that requires immediate medical attention, as it could lead to deafness, blood poisoning, meningitis and even paralysis of the face.

"There is nothing that a pharmacist can do to help or relieve this condition," says Dr Mooney. "The person suffering will need to attend an accident and emergency department to undergo intravenous antibiotics and/

or surgery to drain the infected bone.”

SWIMMER'S EAR:

When the canal between the eardrum and outer ear becomes infected or inflamed, it is known as Swimmer's Ear. As the name suggests, it's usually a result of water getting in the ear, but it could also happen when things like cotton buds have been inserted roughly into the ear, when shampoo runs into the ears when showering, or indeed if bacteria is allowed to enter the ear. An infected hair follicle might also be a culprit. People with diabetes have a more alkaline environment in the ear and as such are more vulnerable to this issue.

Symptoms? You're looking at pain, itchiness, muffled hearing, buzzing or humming. Prompt treatment is essential to prevent the issue becoming a real problem, so suggest heat packs held to the ear and antifungal formulas. More serious cases might require antibiotic eardrops, steroid-based ear drops, medical cleaning and draining of the ear canal and even surgery.

TINNITUS:

A common condition, but one that is rather serious, Tinnitus is when the person is experiencing noises or ringing in their ears or head when no actual noise is present. It can be caused by anything that detrimentally affects the ears, from something as simple as excess wax in the ears to as dire as a tumour pressing on the eardrum. However, typical causes are loud concerts and working in noisy environments without ear protection.

“Medication doesn't really help here,” says Dr Mooney, “but a low-salt, fat, alcohol and caffeine diet can help. The Chinese herb ginkgo balboa has some effect, and if severe and associated with deafness, a hearing aid may help.”

WAX BUILDUP:

Excess wax in the ear can muffle hearing, or even cause deafness, so it's good to be able to prevent this or remedy it. If a customer presents with this problem, suggest they make an appointment with their GP as soon as possible. The doctor can safely use a syringe in their rooms to fill the ear canal with warm water, and flush the built up wax.

VESTIBULAR NEURONITIS:

This affects the balance centre of the ear – the vestibular nerve. When this nerve becomes irritated and inflamed, usually by a viral infection, dizziness and vertigo can occur and may also come hand-in-hand with bouts of nausea and vomiting. This condition will require medical attention and diagnosis by a GP or specialist, but it can thankfully be treated with medications such as antihistamines and anti-nausea medications.

HERPES ZOSTER OF THE EAR:

This is when the herpes zoster virus (shingles) infects the cochlear nerve of the ear, which is responsible for sending sound to the brain, via electrical impulses. The customer will come in complaining of ear pain, vertigo and small blisters on the outer ear and ear canal and sometimes even on the face and neck. In severe cases, the main nerve that services the facial muscles may become infected, which can lead to swelling and frequently facial paralysis.

This requires medical attention by a GP or specialist and treatment can include anti-viral medications, pain relief and even surgery to relieve the pressure on the facial nerve.

COMMON MISTAKES

Doctor Mooney says people tend to make the simplest mistakes with their ears, but they can be costly, in terms of pain, medication, time off work and even long term damage..

- Flying with a cold or flu can hurt the ears and lead to a damaged eardrum.
- Scuba diving with a cold can also be detrimental to ear health.
- Being rough with ear buds – gentleness is key.
- Inserting foreign objects into the ear canal (this includes cotton buds!).
- Not wearing ear protection when working in noisy environments.
- Ear candling. “It is total witch craft,” says Doctor Mooney. “It melts earwax, sure, but you can permanently damage your delicate ear drum.”
- Ignoring signs of ear strife. “These include pain, discharge, deafness, dizziness and ringing (tinnitus).”