

Ear Infections and Antibiotics

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Recent guidelines for pediatricians now recommend that children with suspected ear infections (otitis media) not be given antibiotics right off the bat. The new guidelines suggest that pain management therapies like ibuprofen be implemented instead while antibiotic therapy be reserved only if the infection does not resolve on its' own or is of a more serious nature. These new guidelines come in the wake of increasing cases of antibiotic resistance bacteria. These "super bugs" do not respond to classic prescriptions and require more powerful antibiotics which if overused may result in further resistance. The worst case scenario is a strain of bacteria completely unresponsive to any antibiotic therapies.

For this reason, it is very important to limit antibiotic use to cases where it is absolutely necessary. For the majority of children, the immune system, if given the chance and proper support can adequately resolve most ear infections in a similar time period as antibiotics. Further, letting the immune system handle the infection can often create a more effective response to future ear infections and other upper respiratory bacterial and viral conditions. The more your immune system is exercised, like a muscle at the gym, the stronger it becomes. Antibiotic therapy so strongly augments the immune response that future effectiveness to bacterial and viral conditions is diminished. It is quite common that children who receive repeated courses of antibiotics for repeated ear infections can break the cycle if one or two of those infections is managed without antibiotic therapy. Recent studies demonstrate the presence of antibiotic resistant bacteria in the nasal passages of children whose ear infection recurred after treatment with antibiotics.¹

No parent wants to see their child suffer through an illness. So, you are probably asking what I should do if I am not to rely on antibiotics. There are many natural therapies that help to alleviate the discomfort of an ear infection while at the same time supporting the immune system to work more effectively and efficiently. Naturopathic Medicine includes the use of herbs, homeopathy, vitamins and home therapies that are all very safe and effective for children. All children with ear infections or any upper respiratory infection should be under the care of qualified health care provider. M.D.'s, D.O.'s Naturopathic Physicians, Chiropractors and Nurse Practitioners are all good choices. In certain cases, it is possible for a simple ear infection to progress to a more serious condition like mastoiditis or meningitis. A trained, qualified health care provider should be monitoring the case to make sure these complications do not arise. If you are interested in using natural therapies work with a doctor that has experience and training in these disciplines.

Herbs are wonderful tools to use with children. They gently support immune function and often have some antimicrobial and/or antiviral properties. Elderberry, for example is

¹Antimicrobial resistance in the nasopharyngeal flora of children with acute otitis media and otitis media recurring after amoxicillin therapy.

J Med Microbiol. 2005 Jan;54(Pt 1):83-5.

one of the foremost important herbs when it comes to pediatrics. Elderberry is mainly known for its antiviral properties and is commonly used for flu treatment and prevention. *Larix*, the extract from the bark of a Larch tree is extremely safe and effective in increasing the immune response. Its' immune stimulating properties are similar to that of Echinacea but is known to be more powerful. Imagine Echinacea on steroids! Osha is a herb used frequently in Chinese medicine and also has strong antimicrobial properties. For administration to children, it is best to by these herbs as tincture in a base of glycerin. There are many high quality products best purchased through your qualified health care provider. Chewable tablets are also a great option to consider.

Homeopathic therapy can often be very effective in assisting the body to fight and be resistant to infection. Homeopathic remedies are made from natural substances that are diluted to specific concentrations. For this reason they are extremely safe for the use in all individuals and greatly minimize any chance of negative side effects. The discipline of homeopathy requires extensive study so should be administered under the guidance of a trained practitioner for maximum effectiveness. With that said there are several remedies fairly characteristics for ear infections and parents can become quite good at recognizing good remedy matches for particular cases.

Home hydrotherapy utilizes the application of alternating hot and cold compresses to stimulate blood flow and immune function. A warm water bottle or wash cloth applied behind the ear can greatly soothe the pain associated with otitis media. A few drops of warmed olive oil applied into the ear can also serve as great pain reliever for ear infections but should only be done after a doctor has assessed the condition of the ear drum through a physical exam. Nothing should ever be applied into the ear canal if there is suspicion that the ear drum has ruptured. Other forms of hydrotherapy often utilized by Naturopathic Doctors are very effective in supporting immune function, controlling fever and reducing pain.

With the impending rise of antibiotic resistance, it is important to consider alternative approaches to common pediatric ailments like ear infections. Natural therapies like the ones mentioned can do wonders for addressing these conditions and preventing future ones from happening. For skeptical readers, I encourage you to find neighbors or other people in your community who have experience with complementary medicine and gather their feedback. If you keep an open mind I think you will be surprised how safe and effective these approaches can be.