

House Calls

by Rikki Schuster

Summer has finally arrived and you have just settled into your well deserved Outer Banks vacation when those dreaded words are whispered from your little one's lips, "Mommy, daddy, my ear hurts." OH NO- sleepless nights, fussy child, fevers, doctor visits, this is not what this week was supposed to be like! There is nothing quite like a child (or adult) with an ear infection to put a damper on a beautiful beach vacation.

There are two types of common ear infections. Otitis media, an infection behind the eardrum and otitis externa (Swimmer's Ear), an infection of the outer ear canal. Both types of ear infections are quite uncomfortable, and both should be evaluated by a health care provider.

Symptoms of otitis media in adults are an earache, fever/chills, a feeling of fullness in the ear, and sometimes-nasal congestion and muffled hearing.

Children will typically tug at their ears, have fever, are irritable, have a decreased appetite, and often cry at night when lying down. Otitis media frequently occurs along with a cold or other upper respiratory infection. Fluid will accumulate behind the eardrum via the Eustachian tube (structure that equalizes pressure between the ears, sinuses, and throat) and sets up an environment for bacteria or viruses to grow. The fluid then increases with this infection and pushes on the ear drum causing pain. The pain seems to increase when lying flat, chewing, and swallowing.

Treatment for otitis media generally involves decongestants to aid in draining the fluid build up, over the counter analgesics such as acetaminophen and ibuprofen to help with pain and fever; and typically your health care provider will

prescribe antibiotics if indicated.

Some recent studies have shown that otitis media is actually caused by a virus anywhere from forty to eighty percent of the time. Therefore there is a controversy whether antibiotics are actually indicated in treating middle ear infections, since antibiotics do not cure viruses. However, many providers are concerned that without antibiotic therapy, bacteria in the middle ear may grow out of control and cause serious complications such as hearing loss or infection of the surrounding skull bone (mastoiditis).

To be on the safe side, many health care providers treat all otitis media cases as if bacteria were present and prescribe antibiotics. Of course you should always discuss your treatment options with your provider to gain a better understanding of what treatment is best for your particular infection.

With a large percentage of your summer beach vacation being spent in the water, many people unfortunately find themselves suffering from the symptoms of otitis externa, or 'Swimmer's Ear'.

Symptoms of Swimmer's Ear include itching inside the ear, a watery or yellowish discharge from the ear, and severe pain and tenderness in the ear, especially when tugging on the earlobe. Swimmer's Ear often develops when water, sand, dirt, or other debris enters the ear canal and becomes infected. Other causes can include scratching the ear canal with a cotton swab or other sharp object, cleaning the ear canal harshly or with a sharp object, bubble baths, soaps, shampoos, and allergies.

Treatment often requires prescription eardrops that contain antibiotics to fight the infection. Sometimes oral antibiotics are required for severe infections. Over

the counter analgesics are usually recommended for the discomfort. It is wise to avoid getting the affected ear wet once it has become infected, at least until the course of therapy is completed (usually seven to ten days). If you are prone to getting Swimmer's Ear, there are over the counter preventative drops to use after swimming to help dry any excess moisture that has collected in the ear canal. Once there is pain, however, it is usually too late for the preventative drops, and you should seek medical attention.

Hopefully your Outer Banks vacation will not be interrupted by an unfortunate ear infection. If it does, remember, the key to getting through it is by seeking medical treatment early so you can get back to enjoying the surf and sun you've been waiting for.

Rikki Schuster, PA-C is a certified physician assistant with 8 years of emergency medicine and urgent care experience. She is currently practicing with 'Medical House Calls', and will come to your rental cottage or hotel for evaluation and treatment of minor medical illnesses. Call 252-475-2007 for more information.