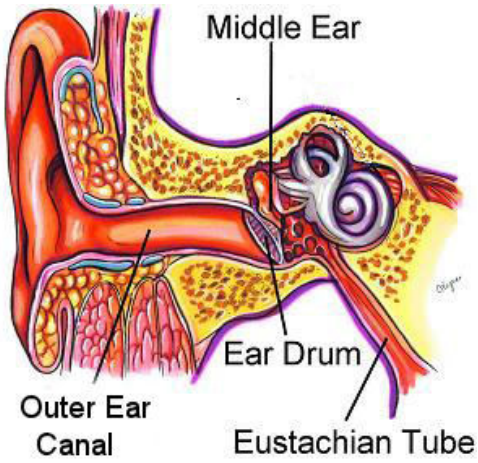
Otalgia (Earache)

Otalgia is pain in or around the ear. When the pain is from the ear itself it is called primary otalgia. Pain may also be coming from somewhere else, like the head and neck. This is called secondary otalgia.



CAUSES

Causes of primary otalgia include:

- Middle ear infection.
- It can also be caused by injury to the ear or infection of the ear canal (swimmer's ear). Swimmer's ear causes pain, swelling and often drainage from the ear canal.

Causes of secondary otalgia include:

- Sinus infections.
- Allergies and colds that cause stuffiness of the nose and tubes that drain the ears (*eustachian tubes*).
- Dental problems like cavities, gum infections or teething.
- Sore Throat (*tonsillitis* and *pharyngitis*).
- Swollen glands in the neck.
- Infection of the bone behind the ear (*mastoiditis*).
- TMJ discomfort (problems with the joint between your jaw and your skull).
- Other problems such as nerve disorders, circulation problems, heart disease and tumors of the head and neck can also cause symptoms of ear pain. This is rare.

DIAGNOSIS

Evaluation, Diagnosis and Testing:

- Examination by your medical caregiver is recommended to evaluate and diagnose the cause of otalgia.
- Further testing or referral to a specialist may be indicated if the cause of the ear pain is not found and the symptom persists.

TREATMENT

- Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics if an ear infection is diagnosed.
- Pain relievers and topical analgesics may be recommended.
- It is important to take all medications as prescribed.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- It may be helpful to sleep with the painful ear in the up position.
- A warm compress over the painful ear may provide relief.
- A soft diet and avoiding gum may help while ear pain is present.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF YOU DEVELOP:

- Severe pain, a high fever, repeated vomiting or dehydration.
- Extreme dizziness, headache, confusion, ringing in the ears (*tinnitus*) or hearing loss.

Document Released: 01/25/2006 Document Re-Released: 12/06/2010
ExitCare® Patient Information ©2011 ExitCare, LLC.