

Ear Tube Surgery

Definition

- Ear tubes are tiny plastic tubes that are placed across the eardrum
- They are placed by an ear (ENT) surgeon
- Also called ventilation tubes, tympanostomy tubes or PE tubes

Health Information

Ear Tubes - When are They Needed?

Here are the current reasons for ear tube surgery:

- Fluid has been present in the middle ear nonstop for over 3 months. Both ears have fluid.
- Also, the fluid has caused a hearing loss greater than 20 decibels.
- Hearing should be tested first. Some children have nearly normal hearing and tubes are not needed.
- Ear infections that occur 3 or more times in 6 months may need tubes.
- Ear infections that occur 4 or more times in 12 months may need tubes.
- Ear infections that do not clear up after trying many antibiotics may need tubes.
- Prevention should be tried before turning to surgery. Examples: Avoid second hand smoke exposure and stop any pacifiers.
- Talk to your child's doctor about ear tubes and if they could help your child.

Benefits of Ear Tube Surgery

- Most children notice hearing is quickly improved after surgery.
- Better hearing helps language development.
- Better hearing continues as long as the ear tubes are open.
- The ear infection rate also improves.

Risks of Ear Tube Surgery

- After the tubes come out, they may leave scars on the eardrum. They may also leave a small hole that doesn't heal. Both of these problems can cause a small hearing loss.
- There is also a small risk when giving anesthesia to young children.
- Therefore, doctors recommend ear tubes only for children who really need them.

Care Advice

1. Overview:

- Ear tube placement is the most common type of surgery performed on children in the US.
- The surgery is done as an outpatient. It takes about 20 minutes.
- The tubes stay in place without any stitches (sutures).
- In general, ear tube surgery is very safe and gives good results.
- Ear tubes allow fluid to drain out of the middle ear space and air to re-enter. That allows the middle ear to become dry and heal.
- This returns the hearing to normal.
- It also lowers the risk of repeated ear infections.

2. **Water Precautions with Ear Tubes:**

- Follow the advice of your ENT surgeon.
- Most children will not need restrictions on swimming or bathing. Exception: All children should avoid getting dirty or soapy water in their ears. Avoid taking bubble baths.
- For children with active or recurrent ear discharge, the following precautions apply:
- Avoid swimming in lakes, ponds, and rivers. Reason: often contaminated water. Ocean water is generally safe.
- Treated swimming pools are usually safe.
- Avoid diving and underwater swimming deeper than 5 feet.
- Surface swimming is safe.
- Note: ear plugs and swim caps usually are not helpful.

3. **Travel Restrictions with Ear Tubes:**

- There are none.
- Your child may fly with ear tubes.
- Your child may also go to the mountains.

4. **What to Expect:**

- In most cases, the tubes come out between 6 and 18 months. They fall out of the eardrum on their own.
- If the ear tubes come out too soon, frequent ear infections may return. About 20% of children need a second set of ear tubes.
- If the tubes stay in over 2 years, talk with your child's doctor. They probably are no longer needed. The surgeon may need to take them out.

Call Your Doctor If

- Your child develops symptoms of an ear infection
- You have other questions or concerns

Pediatric Care Advice

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