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Does Your Child Need Ear Tubes?

Ear tubes or tympanostomy tubes are small tubes that are placed in the eardrum. The eustachian tube allows air into the middle ear space. This is necessary for normal ear function. When the eustachian tube functions poorly, as can happen during an ear infection, fluid can remain trapped behind the eardrum. Inserting an ear tube provides a new path for air to enter the middle ear space. Tubes will lessen ear infections and prevent fluid buildup as long as they remain in the eardrum.

When are Ear tubes needed?

- When your child has had persistent ear infections despite the use of antibiotics.
- When your child has had persistent middle ear fluid in both ears greater than 3 months.
- When your child has evidence of a hearing loss and middle ear fluid.

How are Ear tubes inserted?

Ear tube placement is a surgical procedure done by an Ear,Nose,Throat (ENT) doctor. It is performed in an outpatient department of the hospital. Your child will receive general anesthesia by mask and the whole procedure lasts less than 15 minutes. The ENT doctor makes a small cut in the eardrum, suctions the thick fluid from behind the eardrum (middle ear space) and inserts the tube. If done in the early morning, your child will be up and around by lunchtime. It is a very safe procedure.

What follow-up is necessary after your child leaves the hospital?

During the first follow-up visit (1 Week), your ENT doctor will check the tube to make sure it is working properly. After that, your Pediatrician will examine your child's ears every 3-6 months until the tubes fall out.

What precautions are necessary when bathing or swimming?

Some ENT doctors suggest wearing earplugs when bathing or swimming. If water enters the ear and your child complains of pain afterwards, call our office. Do not use ear drops unless prescribed by a doctor. A little water splashed in your child's ear will usually not cause a problem.

Are there any complications?

Most children have no problems with ear tubes. In some children, tube otorrhea (fluid or pus drainage from the ear canal) occurs. This is similar to an ear infection and requires treatment with oral antibiotics and antibiotic ear drops placed in the ear.

Ear tubes occasionally become blocked with earwax, dried blood, or dried discharge trapped inside the tube after an ear infection has occurred. Ear drops may be prescribed to help loosen the blockage. When possible, the ENT doctor may try to suction out the blockage. If fluid does not reaccumulate in the middle ear space, no further treatment is necessary. If fluid collects again and the tubes remain blocked, new tubes may need to be reinserted.

How are tubes removed from the ear?

Most ear tubes are designed to "fall out" by themselves after 3 months to 2 years (average is 6-12 months). Your child's eardrum will heal within 24 hours of the tube dislodging itself from the eardrum. You may find the tubes on your child's pillow or they may remain in the ear canal and fall out on their own. Tubes lying in the ear canal will not cause your child any discomfort. In some children, the tubes stay in place for many years. Most ENT doctors will recommend surgically taking them out after 3-4 years.

This information should not be used as substitute for the medical care and advice of your child's physician. Health related topics found on the Andorra Pediatrics web site should not be used for diagnosing purposes or be substituted for medical advice. As with any new or ongoing treatment, always consult your professional healthcare provider before making any changes in treatment or beginning any new treatment. If you have any questions or concerns, please call our office.