



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 035 | Hearing conditions

Persistent middle-ear fluid

What it means

Persistent middle-ear fluid, also called otitis media with effusion, is fluid behind the eardrum without the usual signs of an acute ear infection. It can reduce sound transmission and affect hearing access. It is not the same as an actively infected, painful ear. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Fluid may remain after an ear infection or develop because the Eustachian tube is not ventilating the middle ear effectively. Young children's ear anatomy makes this more likely. Some structural or developmental conditions increase risk. Fluid can recur or affect one or both ears. [1,2]

General family education. A concern deserves assessment, but this guide does not diagnose a child or prescribe treatment.



Signs and everyday impact

A child may hear less clearly, respond inconsistently, turn up sound, or struggle with speech in noise. Some children have balance complaints or discomfort, while others have no obvious signs. A hearing impact is possible but language delay should not automatically be attributed only to fluid. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

A clinician examines the eardrum and middle-ear function, with pediatric hearing assessment when indicated. Duration, recurrence, hearing levels, and developmental risk guide follow-up. The team should specify a review date rather than assume fluid has cleared. Other causes of communication difficulty may still need evaluation. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Many cases are monitored because fluid can resolve. Persistent or developmentally important hearing difficulty may lead to ventilation-tube consideration or other support after specialist assessment. Antibiotics for acute infection are different from managing uncomplicated fluid; routine medication does not reliably solve every effusion. Communication support and hearing access measures may be needed during monitoring. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Face the child, gain attention gently, and reduce competing noise. Tell childcare staff about possible fluctuating hearing. Follow the review plan and report changes. Avoid unprescribed ear drops, decongestants, or attempts to remove fluid at home.

When to seek help

Severe pain, fever with worsening illness, swelling behind the ear, drainage, or sudden substantial hearing or balance change needs prompt medical review.

Questions for your care team

- How long has fluid been present and how is hearing affected?
- When will it be reviewed or referred to an ear specialist?
- What communication support should be used in the meantime?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss persistent middle-ear fluid. Persistent middle-ear fluid, also called otitis media with effusion, is fluid behind the eardrum without the usual signs of an acute ear infection. This is general education; each child needs individualized care.

Opening: Define the topic and its developmental context.

Understanding: Explain causes and signs without inviting self-diagnosis.

Assessment: Describe evaluation and distinguish screening from diagnosis.

Support: Discuss treatment, therapy, and practical family supports.

Closing: Explain urgent signs and one clear next step.

Misconception to address: Persistent fluid does not always mean an active infection needing antibiotics.

Before recording: update clinical references and local service details, arrange clinical review, and use fully consented or fictional examples.

Terms in plain language

- Effusion: fluid collected in a body space.
- Eustachian tube: the passage helping ventilate the middle ear.
- Ventilation tube: a small tube placed in the eardrum when indicated.

Sources and further reading

Sources accessed 3 October 2026. Numbered references support the clinical overview. Treatment availability and referral routes vary by country.

[1] Ear Infections in Children, Babies & Toddlers

<https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/ear-infections-children>

[2] Hearing Loss in Children

<https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/hearing-loss-in-children/>

[3] Types of Hearing Loss

<https://cdc.gov/hearing-loss-children/about/types-of-hearing-loss.html>