



How to Care for Your Child's Ear Tubes

Ear tubes help protect your child from ear infections, middle-ear fluid (liquid behind the eardrum), and the hearing problems that go along with them. Most tubes last about 6 to 18 months, allowing many children time to outgrow their ear problems. Most tubes fall out by themselves. The chance of a tube falling in, instead of out, is very rare. Tubes that do not come out after 2 or more years may need to be removed by your doctor.

Possible Complications of Ear Tubes

Complications of ear tubes are usually minor. Some children develop a white mark or patch on the eardrum which is called sclerosis. It *does not* affect your child's hearing or future chance of ear infections. Some children develop a small depression or pocket in the eardrum at the tube site after it falls out. Again, this does not affect hearing and rarely requires treatment. About 1-2 out of every 100 children will develop a small hole (perforation) of the eardrum after the tube falls out. The hole will often close on its own over time, but if it does not, it can be patched in the operating room.

Ear Tubes and Water Precautions

Some children with ear tubes wear ear plugs when swimming. The ear plugs keep water out of the ear canal and out of the ear tube. However, water does not usually go through the tube during swimming. **As a result, ear plugs are not necessary for most children.**

Although most children with tubes do not need ear plugs, they may be necessary in the following situations:

- Pain or discomfort when water enters the ear canal
- Discharge or drainage is observed coming out of the ear canal
- Frequent or prolonged episodes of ear discharge

Other times when ear plugs may be needed on an individual basis are:

- Swimming more than 6 feet under water
- Swimming in lakes or non-chlorinated pools
- Dunking head in the bathtub (soapy water has a lower surface tension than plain water)

A variety of soft, fitted ear plugs are available, if needed, as are special neoprene headbands to cover the ears. *Never* use Playdoh or silly putty as an earplug, because it can become trapped in the ear canal and require surgical removal. Once the tube becomes blocked or comes out, ear plugs are not needed if there is no hole in the eardrum.

Ear Tube Follow-Up and Aftercare

Routine follow-up with your doctor every 6 months is important to make sure that your child's tubes are in place and to check for any possible problems. All children need follow-up no matter how well they are doing. Children often feel well even when there is a problem with the tube. Once the tubes fall out, your child should return for a final re-check after 6-12 months so your doctor can check the ears and be sure that fluid has not built up again.

Source: "Clinical Practice Guideline: Tympanostomy Tubes in Children". July 2013, Volume 149.