



# Caring for your child's hearing

Detailed advice guide

## Watch for the signs

What are the signs of hearing difficulties in young children?

- Not responding
- Not paying attention
- Difficulty following instructions
- Needing repeats or the volume increased
- Frequent distraction

A hearing test can identify if there is a hearing loss, and what part of the hearing system is probably affected.

Depending on which part of the hearing system is affected, will depend on what is the treatment or management. But we can always do something. Early treatment works.

It may also be because the child has normal hearing but an auditory processing disorder. This can be assessed and treated too.

### Why it matters

Untreated hearing loss affects language development, education, and social integration, leading to long-term impacts on employment and mental health.

### What to do

Speak to your GP or your Well Child Tamariki Ora provider.

## Act early

What are the signs?

- Ear pain
- Discharge from the ear – maybe watery, pus like fluid, or smelly
- Itching inside the ear
- Blocked feeling in the ear
- Reduced hearing
- Fever, irritability, ear-tugging, poor sleep/feeding, followed by sudden relief of pain with pus like discharge after the ear drum has burst.

### Why it matters

Discharge from the ear indicates that there is an active infection or inflammation in the ear canal and/or middle ear. Leaving that moisture and discharge in the ear complicates how the situation is managed – it may make the infection

worse, change the health of the ear canal and the ear drum or the bones in the middle ear that are an important part of the hearing system.

It can also cause hearing loss, resulting in the child needing higher volume when listening to TV or devices, speaking loudly, appearing inattentive, or struggling to hear softly spoken speech.

Persistent or frequent ear infections affect how the hearing nerve encodes speech sounds, which can impact a child's language and performance at school. It can also increase inattentiveness and how much effort a child must put into listening, which can cause fatigue and behavioural difficulties. Also, if a child has a hearing loss of sorts, they will seek to increase the volume from the TV or a device and find it hard to hear speech in noisy environments (i.e. in the classroom), which can affect interactions with friends, teachers, and family.

In summary, 'leaky ears' are not normal because they often mean there is active disease that is painful or uncomfortable, risks spreading, and usually requires medical treatment (topical and/or systemic). Repeated or persistent episodes can reduce the quality and consistency of auditory input at precisely the ages when speech, language and learning are rapidly developing.

Although most cases resolve with appropriate treatment, leaky ears can cause complications if undertreated leading to more serious health conditions.

## **What to do**

If your child has smelly and leaky ears, see your GP or your Well Child Tamariki Ora provider.

## **Look after their ears everyday**

Keeping children's ears, noses and hands healthy lowers the chance of infections and possible hearing loss from such things as upper respiratory infections, ear infections, measles and meningitis.

## **Why ears should be kept dry**

Germs love warm, damp places, and a wet ear canal is a good place for them to grow and cause 'swimmer's ear' or worsen existing middle-ear problems. When water sits in the ear or leaks through a hole or grommet in the eardrum, it can carry germs and irritate the delicate skin, leading to pain, swelling, and discharge.

Drying the ears gently after swimming or bathing, and using ear protection in dirty or untreated water, helps reduce this risk. Do not poke inside the ear with cotton buds or other objects, because this can damage the skin, push wax deeper, and make infection more likely.

## **Why nose blowing helps children's ears**

The middle ear drains into the back of the nose through a small passage called the Eustachian tube. When the nose is blocked with mucus, this tube does not work well, and fluid can build up behind the eardrum. Gently blowing the nose,

using saline spray or drops when advised, helps clear mucus so air can move in and out of the middle ear, lowering the chance of ear infections and pressure problems.

Children can be taught to ‘blow, not sniff’ when they have a cold, and to blow one side at a time so they do not strain. Keeping the nose clear is especially important for children who often get ear infections or fluid behind the eardrum.

### **Why hand-washing matters after nose blowing**

Cold and flu germs live in the mucus from a child’s nose and can spread to their ears or to other people if that mucus gets onto hands, toys or shared surfaces. Washing hands with soap and water after nose blowing, coughing, or sneezing removes these germs and reduces the number of colds and ear infections a child and their playmates will get.

Good hand hygiene is a simple habit that protects the whole family. Parents and carers should also wash their own hands before helping a child with nose wiping, feeding or putting in hearing technology.

### **Why immunisation protects ears and hearing**

Some serious infections, such as pneumococcal disease, measles and certain forms of meningitis can damage the inner ear and cause permanent hearing loss. Routine childhood vaccines greatly reduce the risk of these illnesses and lower the number of common middle-ear infections linked to chest and nose infections.

When children are fully immunised, they are less likely to become very unwell, less likely to develop complications affecting the ears and brain, and they help protect vulnerable people around them who cannot be vaccinated.

### **Why children’s ears need protection from loud noise**

Very loud sounds or sounds over long periods can damage the hair cells in the inner ear – once these cells are damaged, they do not grow back. Children’s ears are smaller than adults resulting in increased sound pressure levels within the ear, at the ear drum, and their arms are often shorter so noisy toys are closer – consequently a sound can be louder for a child than an adult and they may not have the language to express this or the ability to reduce or eliminate the sound.

Encouraging ‘quiet breaks’ from headphones and choosing volume limits on devices are practical ways families can protect a child’s hearing.