



## Ear Infections Patient Information Sheet

A discharging ear is normally due to a hole in the eardrum. Occasionally it can be due to an infection of the outer ear canal. A discharging ear in a child or baby is almost always due to a perforated eardrum. It is often difficult for a family doctor to establish the cause of a discharge because the discharge stops the eardrum from being visualised.

The ENT Consultancy doctors have microscopes available with suction so that the ear canal can be carefully vacuumed under microscopic control to remove the discharge and assess the eardrum. In babies and young children cotton wool on a probe is used to clear the discharge which tends to be less worrying for little ones and if they wriggle the cotton wool is not harmful.

### ***Common causes of discharge***

#### **Perforation of the eardrum:**

This can come on acutely, with an ear infection, when the drum perforates the pain normally subsides as the pressure behind the eardrum has been released or it can occur if the middle ear gets infected through a chronic perforation.



**Grommet:**

Discharge through a grommet that has been placed for either glue ear or recurrent ear infections.

**Cholesteatoma:**

A condition where the eardrum is sucked in to form a pocket which collects dead infected skin cells which can cause a discharge.

**Otitis externa:**

A condition where the skin of the ear canal is inflamed and infected, a mixture of infection and eczema.



The discharge is normally a bacterial infection but if there had been prolonged treatment with antibiotics occasionally the discharge is due to a fungus. A swab of the discharge can be analysed in the lab in cases where it is not easy to tell if it is bacterial or fungal.

## ***Treatment of a discharging ear***

- The ear should be kept dry (apart from prescribed drops).
- The ear canal should ideally be cleaned down to the eardrum, otherwise any drops prescribed tend to sit on top of the custard rather than get to the infected area.
- Antibiotic, plus or minus steroid, ear drops are given.
- If the infection is severe or if there is spread of infection to the facial area around the ear, or, often in young children, antibiotics by mouth are also given.
- Once all has settled the eardrum should be checked (if it hasn't been already) to see if there is an abnormality that has caused the discharge.