



What are ear tubes?

Ear tubes or grommets are small tubes made of Teflon plastic, Silastic rubber or titanium metal that are positioned through the eardrum. While in place, the tube allows air to circulate directly behind the eardrum, preventing ear infections and making it unnecessary for your child to “pop” his or her ears. Ear tubes also allow the ear to drain should an infection occur.

Ear tubes are commonly put in place for two conditions:

1. Frequently recurring middle ear infections and/or persistent fluid behind the eardrum. Typically, if a child has had three or four episodes of acute otitis media, ear tubes may be recommended as an alternative to antibiotics to help prevent further ear infections.
2. If a child has had persistent fluid (either mucous or pus) behind the eardrum for an extended period of time (typically two to three months), ear tubes are recommended to treat the hearing loss commonly associated with this problem.

How long do ear tubes last?

In general, ear tubes last several months to a year, but may come out after just a few months or stay in place for several years. While the tubes are in place, the ear has time to heal, and your child has time to outgrow the problem of recurrent infections. Long-term tubes (T-tubes), which are sometimes placed in the ears of older children, remain in place for two to three years and are typically removed in the office.

Can my child swim and take baths with ear tubes in place?

In both instances the answer is yes. Taking baths and showers is rarely a problem with ear tubes. Swimming with ear tubes typically is not a problem either.

Some children, particularly older children, may find it uncomfortable to swim with ear tubes, especially if they swim deeper than 3-4 feet underwater. If this is the case, ear plugs or other coverings for the ears may be used when swimming. However, don't allow your child to scuba dive with ear tubes in place. **Never use alcohol or “Swim Ear” drops while ear tubes are in place.**

What problems (complications) can occur with ear tubes?

The most common problem following ear tubes is drainage from the ears. Drainage can be a result of persistent infection or from fluid backing up the Eustachian tube from the back of the nose. If drainage occurs, it is typically treated with ear drops and occasionally oral antibiotics. Perforation (persistent opening) of the eardrum occurs in about 1% of children with ear tubes. Typically hearing is not affected by a perforation, but a second procedure (ear patch or tympanoplasty) may be required later to repair the opening.