

## MCLA Health Services

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## Self Care sheet

### Ear ache

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Ear aches are a common complaint and can have many causes. The pain results from inflammation and swelling of the structures that make up the ear including the ear canal, ear drum (tympanic membrane), and middle ear. Ear aches should be evaluated by a health care provider as it can be difficult to distinguish between the different causes without an examination. Otitis externa (swimmer's ear) is a skin infection of the outer ear canal often due to excessive moisture in the ear which promotes the growth of bacteria and rarely fungus or if a minor scrape occurs to the ear drum. Otitis media is an infection of the middle ear and ear drum and often follows cold symptoms.

#### **How do I know if my ear ache is serious?**

- ⇒ Ear aches associated with fever, vomiting, headache, and neck stiffness need immediate emergency medical care as these can be the symptoms of meningitis.
- ⇒ Ear aches can result in hearing loss, ringing, buzzing sounds, full or plugged sensation, fever and occasionally discharge from the ear.
- ⇒ More serious infections can cause bloody discharge, hearing loss and fever.

#### **Home Care and Prevention**

- ⇒ Ear aches should be evaluated by a health care provider but prior to the visit use Tylenol (acetaminophen) or Motrin (ibuprofen) as directed on the package for relief of the discomfort.
- ⇒ Drink plenty of fluids. Use a bedside humidifier.
- ⇒ Use a heating pad or heat pack to the ear for relief of discomfort.
- ⇒ Prevention of ear canal infection: dry the ears after showering or swimming. Shake out excess water or use a hairdryer on low 12 inches from the ear.
- ⇒ Avoid putting objects into the ear canal. The ear is very effective at self cleaning and use of Q-tips. Paper clips, pens or finger nails are unnecessary and can be harmful.
- ⇒ Ear infections usually resolve quickly with treatment but symptoms like fullness can take longer to improve. Follow instructions carefully for treatment which can include ear drops and or an antibiotic. Symptoms that do not resolve or worsen require medical follow up.
- ⇒ Excessive wax build up can cause a blocked or full sensation and can be removed by a health care provider.

**Follow up at Health Services for further evaluation and treatment. You need to be examined to determine the cause of an earache. Any concern for a serious infection should seek more immediate medical care.**