

Hi, I'm Dr. David Hill and today we're going to talk about how to relieve an earache. Now, earache just describes pain in the ear. The question is: why does the ear hurt? There are probably two main sources of ear pain. One is what we call swimmer's ear or an acute otitis externa, that is an inflammation or an infection of the tissue from the hole here all the way down to the eardrum that's called the external auditory canal. And that may become wet or damaged as a result of spending a lot of time in water or somebody putting Q-tips or something in there and that can be an intensely painful condition when it occurs. The key is that if you have a really painful swimmer's ear or acute otitis externa, you're probably going to need medical treatment, so you're going to want to see care from a doctor. There are drops that we can put in the ear that include antibiotics and corticosteroids to cut down on the inflammation and fix the infection. Really severe cases sometimes require oral antibiotics as well or even placement of a wick to help the medicine get all the way into the outer ear. Now, another part of the ear that can cause pain is the middle ear. That's the chamber that starts where the eardrum is and goes back to where the nerve – the cochlea that carries sound signals to the brain – is located. Normally that chamber is filled with air and bones called ossicles that carry the sound vibrations. That chamber usually is at the same pressure as the rest of the outside world. But when pressure changes in the chamber, you can get pain from stretching of the ear drum. Now, usually if it's just a matter of the air pressure, it's not tremendously painful. However, divers or people who undergo dramatic pressure changes, like pilots, may get some really painful pressure changes in the ear. Usually that's pretty easily resolved by yawning, chewing, swallowing or doing other things that open up the Eustachian tube, that's a little tube that goes from that middle ear down into your nose and equalizes the pressure. Now another thing that can happen in the middle ear is that fluid can collect there as a result of cold or viral infections. When that fluid becomes infected with bacteria, you get an acute otitis media. Now acute otitis media can be painful but we do have a few things that can help with that pain. Obvious are tylenol or pseudometaphine, and motren or ibuprofen. However, we also have numbing drops which use benzocaine and antipyrine, these chemicals to numb up the eardrum itself. Now some episodes of acute otitis media do need to be treated with antibiotics. Those are particularly severe or complicated episodes or acute otitis media occurring in young children. On the other hand, in older children and adults many episodes of ear infection or acute otitis media resolve without treatment. So ask your doctor if he or she really thinks antibiotics are necessary or whether you can get by with a few days of pain relief. Talking about treating your pain, I'm Dr. David Hill.