

Fluid behind eardrum

What Is Fluid Behind the Eardrum?

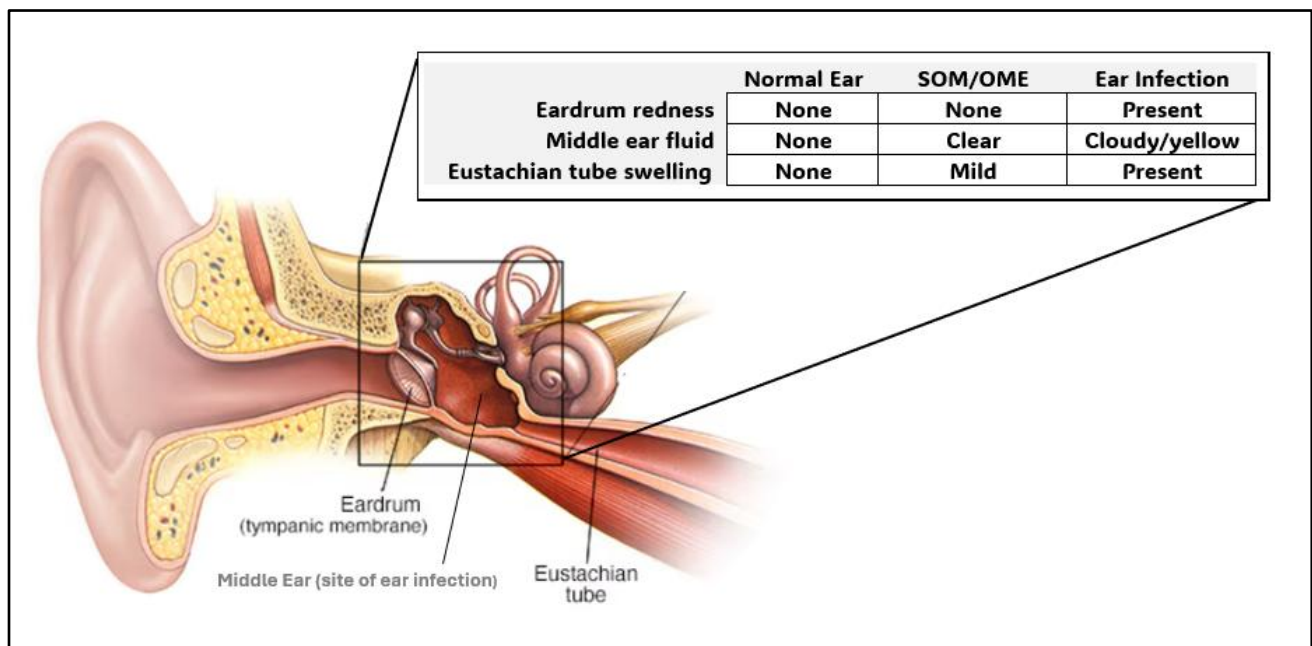
Fluid behind the eardrum (also called **serous otitis media (SOM)** or **otitis media with effusion (OME)**) means there is **non-infected fluid in the middle ear space** (behind the eardrum). This is **NOT the same as an ear infection**.

This occurs when the **eustachian tube** (which drains fluid from the ear) is not working well. This often happens during or after a cold, congestion, or allergies. In infants and young children, the eustachian tube is **smaller and more horizontal**, making it easier for mucus to become trapped behind the eardrum. Because young children also have more difficulty clearing mucus from their noses, fluid can remain in the middle ear longer.

How Is This Different from an Ear Infection?

The image below shows common ear findings:

- **Normal/healthy ear:** The eustachian tube is open, with **no fluid behind the eardrum**. The eardrum appears **translucent and not red**.
- **Fluid behind the eardrum:** There is **clear fluid behind the eardrum**, but **no infection**. The eardrum is **not red** and often still appears translucent. The amount of fluid can vary.
- **Ear infection (acute otitis media or AOM):** The eustachian tube becomes **blocked**, causing fluid to build up. This fluid can become **infected**, leading to:
 - **Redness of the eardrum**
 - **Cloudy or opaque fluid** behind the eardrum
 - Increased pressure and inflammation





Common Symptoms:

Most children **do not have pain or fever**, but you may notice:

- Muffled hearing or “plugged” ears
- Mild fussiness when lying flat (pressure increases in ears when lying flat)
- Trouble hearing or asking for repetition
- Popping or pressure sensation
- Mild balance issues (rare)

Does It Need Antibiotics?

No. Antibiotics do NOT help.

- This fluid is **not infected**
- Antibiotics do not clear the fluid
- Most cases **resolve on their own** with time

How Long Does It Last?

- Fluid may last **weeks to several months**
- Most resolves within **4–12 weeks**
- Some children may have fluid longer, especially after repeated colds

How We Manage It (Watchful Waiting)

Because this condition usually improves on its own, we follow a **watch-and-wait approach**:

- Monitor symptoms and hearing
- Recheck ears at follow-up visits if needed
- Avoid unnecessary medications

What Helps (and What Doesn't)

Helpful:

- ✓ Treat congestion with saline spray + suction (younger children) or nose blowing (older children)
- ✓ Manage allergies if present (review our [allergy guide](#))
- ✓ Encourage hydration
- ✓ ≥ 2 yrs: Start nasal steroid (Flonase Sensimist)

Not Helpful:

- ✗ Antibiotics
- ✗ Decongestants (not recommended in young children and unpleasant side effects)
- ✗ Steroids (in most cases)

When to Call Us

- Ear pain or fever (may indicate a **true ear infection**)
- Hearing concerns affecting school or speech
- Balance problems
- Speech delay or learning concerns
- You are worried

When Is Further Evaluation Needed?

If fluid persists beyond 3 months or affects hearing, we may consider:

- Hearing testing
- Referral to ENT