Common ear problems

An earache is a pain that originates in the outer or middle ear. It is usually the result of inflammation from an infection. Babies and young children are more likely to suffer from acute otitis media, a bacterial or viral infection of the middle ear. This disorder usually develops two to seven days after the start of a cold. Antibiotic treatment may be required, so referral to the doctor is indicated.

Swimmer's ear is an infection of the external ear canal resulting from water getting trapped in there. This allows bacteria to proliferate in the ear canal and leads to infection and inflammation. Also called acute otitis externa, swimmer's ear is best treated with an antibiotic eardrops available on prescription from a doctor.

Wax blockage is an obstruction of the ear canal with wax (cerumen). In some people excess wax is produced, which may harden in the ear canal and block the ear. Wax blockage is one of the most common causes of hearing loss. Many commercial products are available to soften and remove the wax plug, but if the wax plug cannot be removed after using these drops, it is best to consult the doctor.

How to apply eardrops

Eardrops are a sterile solution or suspension of medication. Otic administration refers to giving a medicine directly into the outer ear canal. The otic route is used to provide local drug effects in the ear. This route of administration avoids gastrointestinal absorption problems and first-pass metabolism in the liver. This means that much lower doses of the drug may be given compared with oral dosing, which reduces the risk of systemic side-effects.

When using eardrops, the following should be observed:
• Wash the hands thoroughly with soap and water before using eardrops.
• Clean the outer ear with a damp facecloth.
• Warm the eardrops to near body temperature by holding the bottle in the palm of the hand for a few minutes.
• Draw the medicine into the dropper or hold the dropper-top bottle with the dropper tip down.
• Tilt the affected ear up or have the patient lie on his/her side.
• Gently pull the ear backward and downward (i.e. away from the neck) to open the ear canal.
• Instill the correct amount of drops into the ear. Then gently press on the tragus, i.e. small skin flap over the ear, to help the drops run into the ear canal.
• Keep the ear tilted up for a few minutes. Then insert a soft cotton plug in the ear.
• Repeat with the other ear, if both ears require treatment.
• Replace the dropper cap.

Expired and left-over eardrops should be returned to the pharmacist for safe disposal. Medicines should always be kept out of the reach and sight of children.