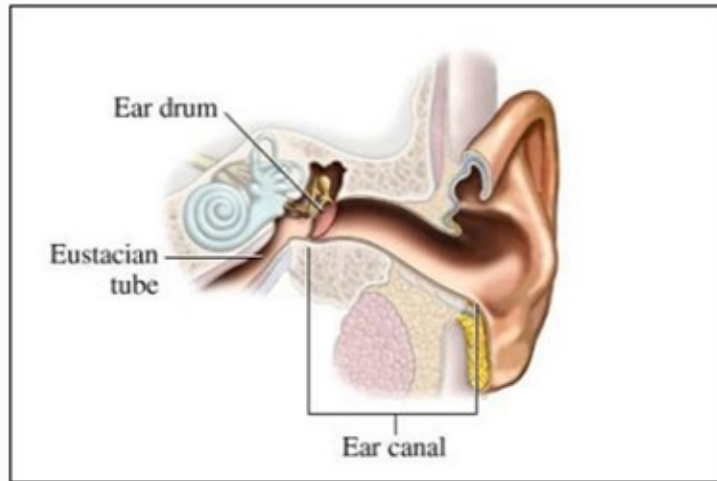


Eustachian Tube Dysfunction

What is eustachian tube dysfunction?

The eustachian tubes are small passageways that connect the upper part of your throat (pharynx) to your middle ears. When you sneeze, swallow or yawn, your eustachian tubes open, allowing air to flow in and out. But sometimes a eustachian tube might get plugged. This is called eustachian tube dysfunction. When this happens, sounds may be muffled and your ear may feel full, or you may have ear pain.



What are symptoms of eustachian tube dysfunction?

If you have eustachian tube dysfunction:

- Your ears may feel plugged or full.
- Sounds may seem muffled.
- You may feel a popping or clicking sensation (children may say their "ear tickles").
- You may have pain in one or both ears.
- You may hear ringing in your ears (called tinnitus).
- You may sometimes have trouble keeping your balance.

Your symptoms may get worse when you are flying (because of altitude changes). Riding in elevators, driving through mountains or diving may also make your symptoms worse.

What causes eustachian tube dysfunction?

The most common cause of eustachian tube dysfunction is excessive mucus and inflammation of the tube caused by a cold, the flu, a sinus infection or allergies.

Who is at risk for eustachian tube dysfunction?

Children are at greater risk of eustachian tube dysfunction because their tubes are shorter and straighter than those of an adult. This makes it easier for germs to reach the middle ear and for fluid to become trapped there. Also, children's immune systems are not fully developed, so it's harder for them to fight off infections.

Smoking and obesity are also risk factors. Smoking damages the cilia (the tiny hairs that sweep mucus from the middle ear to the back of the nose). This can allow mucus to gather in the tubes. In people who are obese, fatty deposits around the tubes can also lead to eustachian tube dysfunction.

How will my doctor know I have eustachian tube dysfunction?

Your doctor will be able to tell if you have eustachian tube dysfunction by talking to you about your symptoms and by examining you. Your doctor will examine your ear canals and eardrums, and your nasal passages and the back of your throat.

How is eustachian tube dysfunction treated?

Symptoms of eustachian tube dysfunction usually go away without treatment. Eustachian tube exercises, such as swallowing, yawning or chewing gum, can help open the eustachian tubes. You can help relieve the "full ear" feeling by taking a deep breath and blowing with your mouth shut and your nostrils pinched closed.

If you think your baby may have eustachian tube dysfunction, give him or her a bottle or a pacifier to encourage the swallow reflex.

If these strategies don't help, your doctor may suggest other options. These can include:

- Using a decongestant to reduce the swelling of the lining of the tubes.
- Taking an antihistamine or using a steroid nasal spray to reduce the allergic response if allergies are a factor.
- Implanting pressure equalization tubes (PETs) in your eardrums to maintain equal ear pressure.
- Making a tiny incision in the eardrum and suctioning out the fluid in the middle ear. This gives the eustachian tube lining time to shrink while the eardrum is healing (usually 1 to 3 days).

How can I avoid eustachian tube dysfunction?

Treating the underlying cause of the mucus or blockage—such as symptoms of allergies, a cold or the flu—can help reduce your risk of developing eustachian tube dysfunction.