Decongestants and Antihistamines May Have Little Use in Treatment of Otitis Media in Children

by Pamela Jones, MA

Otitis media is a common problem in infants and young children. It is an inflammation of the middle ear that is caused by bacterial or viral infections. The inflammation causes earaches and often occurs with a typical cold. Otitis media will typically resolve on its own in about two weeks, however, many parent are anxious to treat the issue. Doctors may recommend different treatments to help relieve some of the pressure in the ear.

The Cochrane Library performed an analysis on several studies that reviewed the benefits and risks of using medications like decongestants or antihistamines in children with otitis media. The review, published in the Cochrane Databases, found that using these medications may not have any benefits for clearing an ear infection.

About the Study

The systematic review included 15 randomized controlled trials with a total of 2,695 participants. The studies assessed the ability of decongestants or antihistamines to provide early cure, relieve symptoms, or prevent further procedures or complications for severe cases.

The review found the medication provided no benefit, including:

- No early cure rate
- No symptom resolution
- No prevention of surgery or other complications

On average the otitis media was relieved in two weeks, which is the same amount of time the condition clears on its own.

Both medications have known side effects that include drowsiness and hyperactivity.

How Does This Affect You?

Otitis media is common and very uncomfortable for children and infants. While it may be instinctive to give medicine to cure the problem, these studies have shown that medicine may be ineffective in relieving the problem sooner than it would have resolved on its own. The medicine also has undesirable side effects.

Talk to your child's pediatrician about ways to prevent ear infections such as avoiding cigarette smoke, handwashing, and immunizations. Your child's pediatrician can also offer ways to relieve pain associated with infection.

RESOURCES:

Kids Health
http://kidshealth.org/

National Institute of Health
http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/

REFERENCES:
