Earache can be painful and worrying, particularly when it affects a child or keeps you awake at night. You may wonder whether to book a GP appointment, call NHS 111 or ask your local pharmacy. In many cases, a pharmacist can offer prompt advice and assess whether you need treatment or further medical help.

In England, the NHS Pharmacy First service allows participating community pharmacies to assess and treat certain common conditions, including some cases of acute earache in children. But Pharmacy First is not a service for every kind of ear pain, and it does not mean every patient will receive antibiotics. The right next step depends on the person's age, symptoms and medical history.

This guide explains what a pharmacist can do, when a GP or urgent service is more appropriate, and how to get the most from a pharmacy consultation.

Can a pharmacist help with earache?

Yes. A community pharmacist can discuss your symptoms, offer advice on easing pain and help you decide whether you need to be examined by a GP or another clinician. If you meet the eligibility criteria, a trained pharmacist at a participating pharmacy may also assess and treat acute otitis media—an infection of the middle ear—through NHS Pharmacy First.

Pharmacists are healthcare professionals, not simply https://healthylifeessex.co.uk/2026/10/the-changing-role-of-community-pharmacies/ people who dispense prescriptions. Their training includes medicines, common conditions and spotting signs that someone needs a different level of care. A consultation can therefore be a useful first step, even if the eventual advice is to contact your GP practice or NHS 111.

What a pharmacist can do depends on the type of ear problem. Ear pain may be caused by an infection, a build-up of earwax, irritation, an injury or pain referred from somewhere else, such as the throat or teeth. These causes need different approaches. A Pharmacy First assessment is not a general ear examination service for every possible cause.

How does earache pharmacy first work?

NHS Pharmacy First was introduced in England to make it easier to get advice and treatment for certain conditions without first making a GP appointment. NHS England sets the framework for the service, while local pharmacies deliver consultations where they are participating and have the appropriate staff available.

For the earache pathway, the service covers eligible children aged 1 to 17 with symptoms of acute otitis media. The pharmacist will ask questions about the symptoms and relevant health information, then assess whether the child is suitable for treatment through the pathway. They will explain what to do next and may provide an appropriate medicine if the child meets the clinical criteria.

That does not mean every child with ear pain will be diagnosed with a middle-ear infection, or that an antibiotic will always be supplied. Many ear infections improve without antibiotics. A pharmacist will consider whether treatment is needed, whether self-care is appropriate and whether the child should be referred for further assessment.

Pharmacy First is available in England. If you live elsewhere in the UK, the arrangements and services may differ. Contact a local pharmacy or check your NHS national health service for the relevant advice.



What to expect at the pharmacy

Here's a story that illustrates this perfectly: wished they had known this beforehand.. A consultation is usually private. The pharmacist may ask when the pain started, whether it is getting worse, whether there is a temperature or fluid coming from the ear, and whether the person has other symptoms. They may also ask about allergies, medicines, existing conditions and previous ear problems.

Be ready to explain the symptoms as clearly as you can. For a child, useful details include whether they are drinking normally, how alert they seem and whether the pain is affecting sleep. The pharmacist will tell you if the Pharmacy First pathway is suitable or if another service is needed.

What can I do for ear pain while I wait?

If symptoms are mild and there are no warning signs, pain relief may help while you seek advice or monitor how things develop. A pharmacist can advise which options are suitable and how to use them safely. Follow the packet instructions and take account of age, other medicines, allergies and health conditions.

- Ask a pharmacist about suitable pain relief, especially for a child or someone with other health conditions.
- Keep the ear dry and avoid putting cotton buds, fingers or other objects into it.
- Do not use ear drops unless a healthcare professional has confirmed they are appropriate for the situation.
- Keep track of when symptoms began and whether they are changing.

These steps do not replace an assessment when symptoms are severe, persistent or getting worse. Avoid trying to remove earwax yourself if you are unsure what is causing the pain.

When should I contact a GP or get urgent help?

Some people with earache need examination or treatment that a pharmacy cannot provide.

Contact your GP practice for advice if the pain is not improving, keeps coming back or is accompanied by other concerns. A GP may be able to examine the ear and consider causes that fall outside Pharmacy First.

Seek prompt medical advice if there is fluid, blood or pus coming from the ear, new hearing loss, significant dizziness, swelling around the ear, or the person seems increasingly unwell. For a baby under 12 months with earache, contact a GP practice or NHS 111 rather than relying on the Pharmacy First earache pathway.

Call NHS 111 for urgent advice if you are unsure what to do or cannot get timely help from your GP or pharmacy. Call 999 or go to A&E for a life-threatening emergency—for example, if someone is difficult to wake, has severe breathing problems or appears seriously ill. Trust your judgement if you are worried about a rapid deterioration.

Is a pharmacist the right choice for every kind of ear pain?

You ever wonder why no. Pharmacy First covers specific conditions and eligibility criteria; it is not a substitute for a full GP assessment in every case. For example, adults with earache may still benefit from pharmacist advice about pain relief and where to seek care, but the Pharmacy First acute otitis media pathway is for eligible children aged 1 to 17 in England.

Likewise, suspected earwax, an injury, a foreign object in the ear or ongoing hearing problems may need a different assessment. Tell the pharmacist about these concerns rather than assuming they are covered by the earache pathway. They can help direct you to the most suitable service.

Community pharmacies do more than dispense prescriptions

Community pharmacies are often easier to reach than other healthcare services, and many offer help with common, relatively straightforward health concerns. Alongside the Pharmacy First pathways, a pharmacist can advise on self-care, over-the-counter medicines and whether symptoms need clinical review.

Depending on the pharmacy and the service available locally, this can include support for conditions such as sore throat, sinusitis, impetigo, shingles, uncomplicated urinary tract infection in eligible women, and infected insect bites. The exact rules differ by condition, including age limits and symptoms that require referral. A pharmacist will assess whether the service is appropriate rather than simply supplying treatment on request.

Pharmacies also contribute to prevention. Many provide flu vaccinations and other vaccination services. Some offer travel vaccinations and travel health consultations with risk assessment, helping people consider destination-specific health risks, existing conditions and the time needed before departure. Availability varies, so check with the pharmacy in advance about the service, eligibility and appointment arrangements.



Will Pharmacy First cost anything?

For eligible patients in England, NHS Pharmacy First consultations and any NHS treatment supplied through the service are provided under NHS arrangements. Prescription charge rules may apply to medicines, although some people are exempt. Ask the pharmacist if you are unsure whether a charge applies to you.

There is an important distinction between NHS services and private services. Some pharmacies offer additional private consultations, vaccinations or travel-health services, and charges can vary. No prices were stated in the scraped content referenced for this article, so it would be misleading to quote a specific fee. Check directly with the pharmacy before booking a private service or vaccination.

How to choose your next step

1. **Check the age and symptoms.** The NHS Pharmacy First earache pathway in England is for eligible children aged 1 to 17 with suspected acute otitis media.
2. **Contact a participating pharmacy.** Ask whether a pharmacist is available to provide the service and whether you need to book.
3. **Describe the symptoms honestly.** Mention when they began, any fever or discharge, other health conditions, medicines and allergies.
4. **Follow the pharmacist's advice.** This may be self-care, treatment through Pharmacy First, or a referral to a GP or another service.
5. **Get further help if things change.** Contact a GP or NHS 111 if symptoms worsen or do not improve as advised; seek emergency help for a serious or life-threatening illness.

Frequently asked questions

Can I walk into a pharmacy with earache?

You can contact or visit a community pharmacy to ask for advice, but check whether a pharmacist is available and whether appointments are needed. To use the NHS Pharmacy First earache pathway, the patient must meet the

service criteria and the pharmacy must be participating.

Will the pharmacist look inside the ear?

The pharmacist will assess the symptoms and decide what can safely be done within the service. Do not assume every pharmacy consultation includes the same examination. If an ear examination or further investigation is needed and is not available through the pathway, the pharmacist can advise you to contact another service.

Will my child get antibiotics?

Not necessarily. Many ear infections improve without antibiotics, and the pharmacist will use clinical guidance to decide whether treatment is appropriate. If the child does not meet the pathway criteria, or appears to need a different assessment, the pharmacist can refer them to a GP or another service.

Can an adult use earache pharmacy first?

Adults can ask a pharmacist for advice, including help with pain relief and deciding where to seek care. However, the NHS Pharmacy First acute otitis media pathway described here is for eligible children aged 1 to 17 in England.

The bottom line

A pharmacist can be a sensible first contact for earache. They can offer practical advice, check whether NHS Pharmacy First applies and help you reach the right service without an unnecessary delay. In England, the Pharmacy First earache pathway is specifically for eligible children aged 1 to 17 with suspected acute otitis media; it does not cover every cause of ear pain or guarantee antibiotics.

If symptoms are severe, worsening or accompanied by warning signs, contact your GP or NHS 111 promptly. For immediate, life-threatening emergencies, call 999. When in doubt, explain what is happening to a pharmacist or NHS clinician and ask what level of care is right for you.