

# Osteopathy for Recurrent Ear Infections

## *A drug free approach to treatment of middle ear infections.*

Osteopathy in the Cranial Field is a very gentle manipulative therapy. It is commonly associated with the treatment of infants with digestive issues such as colic, reflux and constipation but it can also be very effective for treating children suffering recurrent ear infections. Middle ear infection is a common complaint occurring in up to 20% of children under six.

### A Typical Story

Six year old Michael had suffered recurrent ear infections for years and was soon to have his third set of grommets inserted. He had taken repeated courses of antibiotics but was still struggling with the pain and mild hearing loss due to the infections. A friend of his mother suggested treatment with their local osteopath. After taking a detailed history the Osteopath explained there may be restriction in the head and neck that could be affecting the drainage of the ear, contributing to his recurrent infections.

Brisbane Osteopath Trent Sigley who uses Osteopathy in the Cranial Field explained, "In a healthy ear the Eustachian tube drains fluid that collects in the middle ear. When the ear's drainage is poor, recurrent infection is more likely as bacteria thrive in the static fluid within the ear. This drainage is more of a problem in younger children as the Eustachian tube is still quite horizontal. As the child grows, the tubes become more vertical and drainage is therefore aided by gravity."

Osteopathic examination showed there was decreased motion in the left side of Michael's head and at the base of his skull. "Normal motion in the head has a pumping effect on the Eustachian tube which assists the drainage of the middle ear," Trent continued.

Over a period of four osteopathic treatments normal motion was restored to the head and neck, helping with drainage. Healthy function of the nervous system was also

encouraged, affecting the nerves supplying the ear. This improvement makes secretions to the middle ear less viscous, hence a less attractive environment for bacteria. When Michael next visited his Ear Nose and Throat specialist his hearing had returned to normal and there was no longer a need for grommets. Michael made it through the next winter free from infection for the first time.

### Osteopathy

Osteopathy is focussed on improving the function and balance of the body so the skeletal, nervous and circulatory systems all operate smoothly – this is known as homeostasis. Common childhood problems can often be traced back to previous trauma or the birth process. The soft bones in a baby's skull have pliable joints between them and these allow for the distortion that must occur during birth. Sometimes the baby's skull does not spring back normally and this may cause tightness in parts the skull and also give irritation to important nerves and blood vessels in the head.

Osteopathy in the Cranial Field is a very gentle treatment approach, it is perfect for babies and children. The child lies on the treatment table while the practitioner gently uses small pressure through their sensitive hands. The child is completely safe and comfortable as the Osteopath balances different strains and forces in the body and some children even fall asleep. Once balance is achieved in the treatment, the body's self healing mechanism is able to function more efficiently. Approximately three or four treatments often see problems resolved, although with chronic conditions, a longer series of treatment may be required.

In the case of recurrent ear infections, osteopathic treatment is aimed at releasing strain and tension around the head, neck and face. This allows the normal pumping and drainage action of these areas to occur with the person's breathing. By assisting the

fluid drainage through the Eustachian tube the child's immune system has an easier time resolving the infection and there is less pain. Treatment also influences the sympathetic nervous system. Hence the thick, mucous ear fluid becomes more thin and watery and therefore the fluid can flow and drain more freely. Treatment using antibiotics focuses on the symptoms of the blockage, infection and pain, and the use of grommets releases the fluid to the external ear. With these treatments children are prone to a recurrence of infection six to eighteen months later. Osteopathy however, addresses the cause of the blockage of fluid in the Eustachian tube and the lack of healthy movement in the head and neck, allowing the fluid to drain normally and helping to prevent recurrent infections. Osteopathy can also, of course, be used in conjunction with grommets and antibiotic treatment.

#### Middle ear infections

Eustachian tube function is vital in creating even pressure between the outside world and the middle ear. In children, middle ear pressure is slightly negative. This causes an increased likelihood of nasal secretions or bacteria being sucked back through the tube to the ear. If the tube becomes blocked, infection can quickly develop. The condition is quite painful for children, not only from the inflammation caused by the infection but also by the inability to equalise the pressure in the middle ear. This is the same pain people experience during take off and landing of an aircraft, where the pressure inside the ear is less than outside, causing a crushing sensation deep in the ear. Studies show that 40% of children experiencing middle ear infections will still have fluid in the middle ear one month after the initial infection clears, and 10% after three months. There is a strong correlation between persistent fluid in the middle ear and recurrent infection.

Rebecca Reed, fellow Brisbane Osteopath, reported that children suffering chronic ear infections not only experience pain and other symptoms associated with infections like fevers, but can also have difficulty with speech, language and learning. She explained, "When the child's ears are full of

fluid it leads to a conductive hearing loss. This means the sounds perceived by the brain are more muffled and the child has trouble distinguishing between voices and background noise. This can make some children misbehave or become frustrated because they are unable to understand what is going on around them. The longer that the fluid remains in the ear the more pronounced the problem can become". She added, "The good thing about Osteopathy is that treatment can be effective from birth through to older children, the body is always ready to be helped in functioning the way it was designed to. The body has an incredible ability to recover from illness, our patient results speak for themselves".

*By Rebecca Reed-Baxter B.App.Sc (Clin.Sc), B Osteo. Sc and Trent Sigley B.App.Sc (Clin.Sc), B Osteo.Sc are registered Australian trained Osteopaths working at the Brisbane Osteopathic Centre in Wilston. More information on Osteopathy in the Cranial Field can be found at [www.brisbaneosteopathic.com.au](http://www.brisbaneosteopathic.com.au)*

#### References:

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