Silence is golden... sometimes muffled sounds, or ringing in the ears might also indicate the presence of an ear infection or eardrum injury. Ear infections are caused by a buildup of fluid in the eustachian tube—a tube that drains fluid from the ears into the nasal passages. Ear infections are very common among young children, although they can occur in adults as well. It has been estimated that seven out of 10 children will have at least one ear infection by age three. A good portion of these children will have more than one ear infection. Ear infections occur in children most often, simply because children’s eustachian tubes are shorter and less angled than are adult eustachian tubes, making blockage more likely when inflammation occurs. Contrary to common fear, ear infections don’t normally cause permanent hearing loss. However, if ear infections aren’t treated conscientiously, it is possible for the infection to spread to the inner ear, where it can damage ear bones and the inner ear structure, causing permanent hearing damage. With this in mind, it’s important to treat your child’s ear infection early and with a great deal of focus and determination. Doing so will better ensure a lifetime of proper hearing for you and/or your youngster.

**Signs & Symptoms To Look Out For**
Because ear infections often occur in young children, they may not always be able to communicate the situation clearly. Parents should be aware of nonverbal cues indicating that an infection is present. Increased irritability in your child, or pulling on the ear, should clue parents in that an infection may be present.

**Other symptoms include:**
- Fever in an infant (younger than 3 months) greater than 100°F, or in an older child greater than 102°F
- Ear pain
- Increased crying in young children and infants
- Temporary hearing loss
- Sudden loss of appetite
- Preference for sleeping in an upright position
- Thick, yellow drainage from the ear, possibly including blood

**When To Seek Care For Ear Infections**
If pain and discomfort lasts beyond two to three days, seek medical attention. Ear infections are commonly treated with antibiotics. Other signs that you should contact your healthcare provider include the following:
- If pain continues for more than two to three days after practicing self-care
Ear Infections (continued)

+ If your ear pain is severe, or getting worse
+ See a doctor if your pain is accompanied by headaches, a stiff neck or back, fever, dementia, or irritability
+ If the infection is present in an infant (younger than three months) with a fever of greater than 100°F or an older child with a fever of greater than 102°F
+ If yellowish or bloody drainage is escaping from the ear
+ If you notice redness or swelling behind the infected ear

Treating Ear Infections At Home
Most ear infections will run their course within a few days using self-care. In fact, nearly 80 percent of ear infections clear up without any treatment at all. Use the following self-care techniques to address an ear infection properly.

+ Apply heat to the ear using a heating pad or warm washcloth.
+ Employ an over-the-counter medication such as acetaminophen, or ibuprofen. Because of the risk of Reye’s syndrome, do not give aspirin to children!
+ Drink eight, 8 oz. glasses of clear fluids daily.
+ Avoid getting water in the infected ear.
+ Try using eardrops with a local anesthetic. Eardrops should not be used if there is drainage from the ear.

Preventing Ear Infections
Ear infections, especially in younger children, are very hard, if not impossible to prevent. There are, however, a number of steps you can take to make them less likely. Practice the following tips to minimize your child’s risk of an ear infection.

+ Limit exposure to other children who have colds. Daycare centers can be breeding grounds for ear infections. Try a smaller daycare or keep your child at home if possible.
+ Breast-feed your baby. Infants who are breast-fed have lower incidence of ear infections.
+ Use care when bottle-feeding. Feeding infants while they’re in an upright position can help to prevent ear infections.
+ Wash hands frequently. Ear infections are usually the result of other infections like a cold or the flu. Keeping your hands clean can reduce your child’s chances of coming down with an ear infection.
+ Avoid cigarette smoke. Ear infections are more common in children who are exposed to cigarette smoke.
+ Keep current on childhood immunizations. There is no specific immunization for ear infections, however, common immunizations may make your child more resistant to illnesses that may lead to later ear infections.
+ Be careful when using a pacifier. Babies who continue to use their pacifiers after 12 months of age are more likely to develop ear infections.

A Self-Care Essential
Skip the Q-tip. Ear specialists recommend that cotton swabs NOT be used to clean ears, because they can be traumatic to the ear canal. Cotton swabs tend to force old skin, wax, and debris toward the eardrum, doing more harm than good. Try using a solution of white vinegar and rubbing alcohol applied with an ear dropper to remove wax. Don’t use this method if you have a perforated eardrum.