



Cholesteatoma

WHAT IS A CHOLESTEATOMA?

A cholesteatoma is an abnormal skin growth behind the eardrum, normally the result of severe or repeated cases of 'glue ear' (otitis media) or other middle ear infections. The growth can increase in size, forming a skin cyst or pouch and damaging the delicate bones of the middle ear, affecting hearing and balance.

Cholesteatomas are slow growing, non-malignant growths but, left untreated, they can result in serious damage to the middle and inner ear. Contact with water can increase the risk of infection. If the ear is infected, the enzymes contained in cholesteatomas will react with the fluid to erode the bone to the inner ear, potentially causing hearing loss and, if facial nerves are also affected, paralysis. In rare and extreme cases, untreated cholesteatomas can erode the intercranial cavity, causing more serious infections such as meningitis.

Although middle ear infections such as glue ear are the principal cause of cholesteatomas, the condition is relatively rare and the vast majority of middle ear infections will leave no lasting damage.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Cholesteatomas are not easy to detect without an ear examination. For this reason, doctors advise regular ear examinations for patients with a history of recurring ear infections. However, noticeable symptoms can include:

- Hearing loss
- Recurring discharge from the ear
- Dizziness (in advanced cases)
- A feeling of 'fullness' or pressure in the ear
- Facial muscle weakness (in advanced cases)
- An ache behind or in the ear (especially at night)

WHAT TREATMENT IS AVAILABLE?

The first stage of treatment of cholesteatoma will involve tackling the underlying infection which is causing the growth. A course of antibiotics combined with a thorough cleaning of the ear will often be sufficient. Cholesteatomas are often associated with the growth of small polyps. Again, before treatment can progress, these polyps must first be removed either with antibiotics or surgical intervention.

Once the infection has been successfully treated, a decision on whether or not to proceed with surgery will be made.

WHAT RESEARCH IS BEING CONDUCTED INTO CHOLESTEATOMA?

Deafness Research UK is the only charity dedicated to supporting medical research into deafness and other hearing problems. Deafness Research UK has funded a number of research teams studying cholesteatoma, including:

- A team of researchers at the University of Nottingham, who evaluated the role of special enzymes, called MMPs, to see how they affect the ear.
- Researchers in Glasgow who studied the early stages of the cholesteatoma, gaining vital knowledge about how the disease progresses.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION ABOUT CHOLESTEATOMA?

If any of your questions concerning cholesteatoma have not been answered by reading this factsheet, contact the Deafness Research UK Information Service for further assistance. Our Information team will either answer your enquiry directly or refer it to one of our scientific or medical advisers.

Open: 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m., Monday to Friday (a message can be left at other times).

Freephone: 0808 808 2222

Textphone: 020 7915 1412

E-mail: info@deafnessresearch.org.uk

or click the 'ask question' option from our website homepage:
www.deafnessresearch.org.uk

Deafness Research UK is the only national medical research charity dedicated to helping people with deafness, tinnitus or other hearing problems.

Scientists are now predicting that within the next ten to fifteen years there could be a cure for some forms of deafness and much more effective treatments for tinnitus. Deafness Research UK is at the forefront of this work.

You can support us by making a donation or joining the Deafness Research UK League of Friends. For more information call us on 0207833 1733 or write to:

Deafness Research UK, 330-332 Gray's Inn Rd, London WC1X8EE
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Reviewed: September 2006