

# HEALTH REPORT

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## MANY EAR TUBE INSERTIONS MAY BE UNNECESSARY IN CHILDREN

Parents of children with ear problems should be wary of quick recommendations by doctors to insert ear tubes. A new study found that in many cases ear tubes are surgically inserted too soon, thus subjecting children to general anesthesia for a medical procedure that may be unnecessary.

Ear tubes, known medically as tympanostomy tubes, are small implants that ventilate the middle ear space to the ear canal through the tympanic membrane. These tubes are often inserted to treat children who have frequent or reoccurring middle ear infections or a persistent flow of fluid in the middle ear even though they show no signs of infection. Attempting to solve these issues with the insertion of ear tubes is a common practice.

The procedure of inserting the tubes requires that the child be placed under general anesthesia. In the United States alone, over 500,000 children experience this possibly unnecessary surgery every year.

Researchers at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City were determined to find out if these procedures were absolutely necessary. Study leader Dr. Salomeh Keyhani, an assistant professor in the center's Department of Health Policy and her colleagues examined clinical data for 682 children who received ear tubes from five New York Metropolitan area hospitals in 2002. Data was collected from pediatricians, otolaryngologists, and hospital charts for each child for the year prior to surgery.

The persistence of ear infection and fluid discharge is the key to making a medical decision to insert ear tubes. According to a consensus of the American Academies of Pediatrics, Family Physicians and Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery, the general recommendation is that children should not receive ear tubes unless the fluid problem continues for at least 3 to 4 months consecutively.

“One of our key findings is that more than three quarters of children in our study who got ear tubes had fluid for less than a month and a half,” said Dr. Keyhani. Had a medical professional suggested watchful waiting or alternative medical treatment, many of these surgeries might have been unnecessary.

“Ear infection is the most common illness which children present to the doctor,” she said. “We found that many children are getting surgeries for minor disease and the typical child who gets ear tube surgery does not have a disease severe enough to warrant the operation. If the study findings could be applied to the rest of the country, it would be particularly troubling.”