

Referred Otalgia

The following is some brief guidance on the management of referred otalgia. It is written with the intention of helping the Ear Practitioner to diagnose diseases that cause referred ear pain and to know when to refer for specialist treatment. It does not replace a good knowledge of the underlying anatomy, physiology or pathology and these must be studied as well.

You should use this guidance only after a careful history has been taken and an examination performed.

Remember these key features:

1. Referred otalgia is diagnosed when the patient complains of ear pain but the ear exam is normal
2. If the patient has hoarseness, pain on swallowing, is a long term smoker or an alcoholic you must consider cancer as a possibility and refer
3. You must examine the patient's mouth, teeth, and tongue for infections and cancers
4. You must examine the neck for lumps
5. You should palpate the temporomandibular joint and the muscles attached to it
6. You must keep a careful note of the history and examination

Patient complains of ear pain	
Ear exam normal	Ear exam abnormal
<p>The diagnosis is referred otalgia. You must ask about:</p> <p>Hoarseness</p> <p>Smoking and alcohol history</p> <p>Pain or difficulty with swallowing</p> <p>Coughing up blood</p> <p style="text-align: center;">You must examine:</p> <p>The tongue – is there an ulcer or growth?</p> <p>The tonsils – is one much larger than the other?</p> <p>The tonsils – is there infection?</p> <p>The lips & gums – is there a growth or persistent ulcer?</p> <p>The neck – is there a slowly growing or large mass?</p> <p>The teeth – is there infection or decay?</p> <p>The TMJ and muscles – is there tenderness?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Proceed to manage the ear disease</p> <p>➔ Yes? Refer to ENT</p> <p>➔ Yes? Refer to ENT</p> <p>➔ Yes? Refer to ENT</p> <p>➔ Yes? Refer to ENT</p> <p>➔ Yes? Refer to ENT</p> <p>➔ Yes? Refer to ENT</p> <p>➔ Yes? Give amoxicillin 250mg. 3x daily for 7 days</p> <p>➔ Yes? Refer to ENT</p> <p>➔ Yes? Refer to ENT</p> <p>➔ Yes? Refer to dentist</p> <p>➔ Yes? Refer to dentist</p>