

Q & A

with an ENT



What is an otolaryngologist?

Marcella Bothwell, MD

Do people you meet generally understand what an otolaryngologist is and does?

Unfortunately no – the specialty’s name is a very long and very Latin name for the study of the ears and throat. We’re more commonly referred to as an ENT (Ear, Nose, and Throat), or ENT surgeon. The name also does not begin to explain what the ENT surgeon does in the clinic or the operating room. One of the things that drew me to the field was the ability to diagnose and then medically and/or surgically treat my patients. The ENT is essentially the specialist for all the head and neck minus the eyes and brain.

How long and intensive was the training you underwent to become an otolaryngologist-head and neck surgeon?

After four years of college, you can apply for medical school, where the program generally lasts another four years. After that, you must complete a five-year ENT Residency program, which sometimes includes one or two more years studying General Surgery. So if you complete the minimum nine years after college, you then become Board eligible to take the American Board of Otolaryngology/Head and Neck Surgery. Some ENTs choose to go even further with their training with a fellowship that lasts one to three years. These ENTs usually are at universities or in large multispecialty groups where general ENTs send even more complex patients to them. Fellowships include: Allergy, Ear, Facial Plastics, Pediatric ENT, Rhinology or Sinus, Oncology/Head and Neck Surgery, and Voice.

What kind of patients do you see?

An ENT can see patients with pretty much any diseases, birth defects, or tumors, including cancers of the head and neck area. There is much more to diagnosing ear problems than just the common “old age” hearing loss. We must make sure there are no other diseases or tumors of the ear before placing hearing aids in our patients. ENTs frequently see adults for allergy, sinusitis and voice problems. Sometimes medications are prescribed and sometimes sinus surgery is necessary, and this can be determined by the visit

to an ENT. Parents bring their most precious belongings, their children, to see an ENT for common problems such as recurrent ear infections, nasal obstruction, and sleep disturbance; sometimes we’ll see more rare problems in children such as airway obstruction or neck masses. Adults and children can even see an ENT for cosmetic procedures.

When should someone think of seeing an ENT for their health concerns?

Remember, the ENT is the specialist for all the head and neck region except eyes and the brain. ENTs also commonly work closely with neurosurgeons and eye doctors as well. When you have a medical problem in the head and neck area you should contact your physician and then determine if an ENT can help diagnose and treat that problem.

Can you think of some reasons this summer in which someone might want to call your office?

Summertime is when everyone goes outdoors so allergy issues and broken noses are very common. If your family spends a lot of time in the water, swimmer’s ear is something to look out for. And when kids are out on vacation, it’s a good time to schedule having their tonsils removed if that was an issue during the school year.

Marcella Bothwell, MD, is a pediatric otolaryngologist-head and neck surgeon at Rady Children’s Hospital in San Diego, CA. She is a member of the American Academy of Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery’s Pediatric Otolaryngology Committee, and is Vice Chair of the Board of Governors’ public relations committee.

