



What Is an Otolaryngologist—Head and Neck Surgeon?

Insight into ear, nose, and throat specialists

- What do otolaryngologists treat?
- How are ear, nose, and throat specialists trained?
- Why should I see an otolaryngologist?
- and more...

Otolaryngology (pronounced oh/toe/lair/in/goll/oh/jee) is the oldest medical specialty in the United States. Otolaryngologists are physicians trained in the medical and surgical management and treatment of patients with diseases and disorders of the ear, nose, throat (ENT), and related structures of the head and neck. They are commonly referred to as ENT surgeons.

What do otolaryngologists treat?

Otolaryngologists diagnose and manage diseases of the ears, nose, sinuses, larynx (voice box), mouth, and throat, as well as structures of the neck and face.

The ears—Hearing loss affects one in ten North Americans. The unique domain of otolaryngologists is the treatment of ear disorders. They are trained in both the medical and surgical treatment of hearing loss, ear infections, balance disorders, ear noise (tinnitus), and some cranial nerve disorders. Otolaryngologists also manage congenital (birth) disorders of the outer and inner ear.

The nose—About 35 million people develop chronic sinusitis each year, making it one of the most common health complaints in America. Care of the nasal cavity and sinuses is one of the primary skills of otolaryngologists. Problems in the nasal area include allergies, smell disorders, polyps, and nasal obstruction due to a deviated septum. Otolaryngologists can also correct the appearance of the nose (rhinoplasty surgery).

The throat—Communicating (speech and singing) and eating a meal all involve this vital area. Specific to otolaryngologists is expertise in managing diseases of the throat, larynx (voice box), and the upper aero-digestive tract or esophagus, including voice and swallowing disorders.

The head and neck—This area of the body includes the important functions of sight, smell, hearing, and the appearance of the face. In the head and neck area, otolaryngologists are trained

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to treat infections, benign (non-cancerous) and malignant (cancerous) tumors, facial trauma, and deformities of the face. They perform both cosmetic plastic and reconstructive surgery.

How are ear, nose, and throat specialists trained?

Otolaryngologists are ready to start practicing after completing up to 15 years of college and post-graduate training. To qualify for certification by the American Board of Otolaryngology, an applicant must first complete college (four years), medical school (four years), and at least five years of specialty training. Next, the physician must pass the American Board of Otolaryngology examination. In addition, some otolaryngologists pursue a one- or two-year fellowship for more extensive training in one of eight subspecialty areas.

These subspecialty areas are allergy, facial plastic and reconstructive surgery, head and neck, laryngology (throat), otology/neurotology (ears, balance, and tinnitus), pediatric otolaryngology (children), rhinology (nose), and sleep disorders. Some otolaryngologists limit their practices to one of these eight areas.

What are the seven areas of expertise in the field of otolaryngology?

- **Allergy:** treatment by medication, immunotherapy (allergy shots) and/or avoidance of pollen, dust, mold, food, and other sensitivities that affect the ear, nose, and throat.
Treating: hay fever, seasonal and perennial rhinitis, chronic sinusitis, laryngitis, sore throat, otitis media, dizziness.
- **Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery:** cosmetic, functional, and reconstructive surgical treatment of abnormalities of the face and neck and ear.
Treating: deviated septum, rhinoplasty (nose), face lift, cleft palate, drooping eyelids, hair loss, and other ear deformities.
- **Head and Neck:** cancerous and noncancerous tumors in the head and neck (nose/sinuses, mouth, throat, voice box and upper esophagus), including the thyroid and parathyroid.
Treating: lump in the neck or thyroid, cancer of the voice box.
- **Laryngology:** disorders of the throat, including voice and swallowing problems.
Treating: sore throat, hoarseness, swallowing disorder, gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), infections and tumors.
- **Otology/Neurotology:** diseases of the ear, including trauma (injury), infection, benign tumors, cancer, and nerve pathway disorders, which affect hearing and balance.
Treating: ear infection; swimmer's ear; hearing loss; ear, face, or neck pain; dizziness, ringing in the ears (tinnitus).
- **Pediatric Otolaryngology:** diseases in children with special ENT problems, including birth defects of the head and neck and developmental delays.
Treating: ear infection (otitis media), tonsil and adenoid infection, airway problems, asthma and allergy/sinus disease, neck tumors.



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- **Rhinology:** disorders of the nose and sinuses.
Treating: sinus disorder, nose bleed, stuffy nose, loss of smell, polyps, tumors.

Why should I see an otolaryngologist?

These specialists differ from many physicians in that they are trained in both medicine and surgery. Otolaryngologists do not need to refer patients to other physicians when ear, nose, throat, or head/neck surgery is needed, and therefore can offer the most appropriate care for each individual patient. Otolaryngologists are the most appropriate physicians to treat disorders of the ears, nose, throat, and related structures of the head and neck.

What other criteria should I consider when choosing an otolaryngologist in my area?

- Medical education and training
- Licenses or board certification
- Practice areas
- Areas of specialty or subspecialties
- Office locations
- Physician availability
- Insurance coverage



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