

So, I wake up on a recent morning and my left ear hurts. Painful and itchy at the same time. Maybe I slept on it wrong. I pad into the bathroom to assess the damage. To my horror, it's an angry red hue and twice the size of my other ear. Picture "Quark" on Star Trek. Some kind of bug bite, most likely. Don't panic, I tell myself. Time to wake the wife. She's more objective about these things. Unless it's *her* ear.

"Does my ear look funny?" I ask.
She screams like the woman in "The Fly."

Now it's time to explore the options. My regular family doctor is no help. He's currently booking appointments for June. I'll be dead long before then. Same for Emergency. Unless you've got a gushing artery, you can sit there until the Second Coming. That leaves Urgent Care. Or, as my daughter likes to call it, "Urgent Kill."

As I pull into the parking lot, I'm pleased to see only three other vehicles. Maybe it's a slow day and I'll get in and out. The grim lady behind the glass shoves a clipboard in my direction. I fill out the paperwork and take a plastic seat. A few rows over, a geezer hawks up a furball. I move as far away as possible. After only fifteen minutes, the grim lady calls my name. I pop up immediately and she ushers me into an examining room.

After a short wait, a short nurse enters. "What seems to be the problem?" she asks. By now, my ear is throbbing like a metronome on crack. I'm sure it's begun to swallow the entire left side of my head. I point to the ear.

"Oh, my," she gulps, really looking at me for the first time. Hastily, she jots down something in my chart, takes my vitals and backs out of the room. The door clicks shut.

"That wasn't so bad," I think. I position myself on the examining table, optimistically expecting the doc to arrive any second. Two hours later, I'm still waiting. Finally, he comes in, wearing a wrinkled lab coat and a distracted expression.

"What seems to be the problem?" he asks.
"My back hurts," I say. "From sitting on this table."
He actually chuckles. That's when he notices my ear. He stops in mid-chuck. After a peek with that pointy flashlight thing, he says, "It's an infection. Of the cartilage. We don't see a lot of those. Very rare."

Lucky me. "What can you do about it?"

"Antibiotics." He scrawls out a prescription and I leave, but not before ponying up the \$30 co-pay.

Four days later, my ear is good as new. The day after that, the infection comes roaring back, worse than before. I again find myself at Urgent Care. Another two-hour wait, another doctor, another ear discussion. He explains two possible courses of treatment, both involving different antibiotics. Then he asks, "What do you think we should do?"

Maybe he's trying to cover his malpractice-prone ass. Maybe he believes medicine is a collaborative discipline. Maybe he's a schmuck.

As a longtime consumer of TV doctor dramas, I'm totally prepared for this moment. "Which one is stronger?" I ask.

"The Cipro."

"Let's go with that."

Wait'll he gets my bill.

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