OSCE checklist for ear drops administration

An OSCE checklist for ear drops administration covers checking the prescription and which ear, asking about a perforated eardrum or grommets, warming the drops in the hand, positioning the head, straightening the ear canal, instilling the drops and keeping the head tilted for a few minutes.

OSCE checklist for ear drops administration: steps to practise

1. Check the prescription for the right patient, medicine, which ear, dose, time and expiry, and check the allergy status.
2. Wash your hands, introduce yourself, confirm identity (name, date of birth and wristband), explain and gain consent.
3. Ask about a known perforated eardrum, grommets or ear surgery. If present and not noted on the prescription, check with the prescriber before giving the drops.
4. Check the bottle label, expiry and date opened, and warm the bottle in your hands. Never use hot water or a microwave.
5. Wash your hands and put on gloves if there is discharge or your policy says. Look at the outer ear for discharge, redness or swelling, and clean the outer ear only. Do not put anything into the canal.
6. Ask the patient to lie on their side with the affected ear up, or to tilt the head.
7. Straighten the ear canal: gently pull the ear back and up for an adult, or back and down for a young child.
8. Instil the number of drops prescribed, aiming at the side of the canal, without touching the ear with the dropper.
9. Ask the patient to stay in position for a few minutes. Gently pressing the small flap in front of the ear can help the drops go in.
10. Wipe any excess drops from the outer ear and make the patient comfortable.
11. Remove gloves, wash your hands, sign the chart and record the ear treated and any reaction. Report severe pain, bleeding, sudden hearing loss or dizziness to the nurse in charge or prescriber.

What candidates commonly forget

- Not asking about a perforated eardrum or grommets
- Cold drops causing dizziness
- Not straightening the canal
- Pulling the ear the wrong way for the age
- Not checking which ear
- Putting cotton buds or cotton wool deep into the canal

Local policy comes first

This is our own practice checklist. Your college, hospital or country may do some steps differently. Where local policy and this list disagree, follow local policy.

Practise the hands-on steps with a classmate or in a skills lab, because an AI patient cannot watch your technique. You can practise the talking part with an AI patient, and try one station free with no sign-up. Next, try A medicine round in rehabilitation. Back to the medical surgical nursing OSCE page: medical surgical nursing OSCE, or see the full OSCE checklist list.

Common questions

What is the OSCE checklist for ear drops?

Check the prescription and which ear, wash hands, confirm identity and consent, ask about a perforated eardrum, warm the bottle in the hand, position the patient, straighten the canal, give the drops, keep the head tilted, wipe, sign and record.

Which way do I pull the ear in an adult?

Back and up. In young children the usual teaching is back and down. Follow what your course teaches.

Why warm the drops?

Cold drops can cause dizziness or discomfort. Warm them in your hand only.

Sources

- NHS: otitis externa
- NICE NG5: medicines optimisation

Checked 2026-11-13. Fees and rules change, so confirm them with the regulator before you book.