

Otitis Externa

Otitis externa (also known as Swimmer's ear) is an infection of the ear canal, the tubular opening that carries sounds from the outside of the body to the eardrum. It usually develops in ears that are exposed to moisture. Swimmer's ear often happens during the summer months, when many of us are enjoying water activities. People who don't swim can also develop it by scratching their ear canals when they try to clean their ears. This is especially true if they use cotton swabs or dangerously sharp small objects, like hair clips or bobby pins.

The main sign is severe ear pain that gets worse when the outside part of the ear is pulled or pressed on. Sometimes there is itching in the ear canal before the pain begins. The outer ear might get red or swollen, and lymph nodes around the ear may get enlarged and tender. Sometimes, there's a greenish-yellow discharge of pus from the ear canal. It can be hard to hear in the affected ear if pus or swelling of the canal begins to block passage of sound into the ear.

If it's treated with prescription ear drops, swimmer's ear usually gets better within 7 to 10 days. The pain should lessen within a few days of treatment. If the opening into your ear is narrowed by swelling, your doctor may clean your ear and insert a wick (tiny sponge) into your ear canal to help carry ear drops into the ear more effectively. If you had a wick placed, it is important to make a follow-up appointment in 7-10 days for removal since these are not dissolvable. For a severe infection, you might also get antibiotic liquid or pills to take by mouth. Your doctor may send some of the fluid draining from your ear to a lab to help identify what type of germ is causing the infection.

At home, follow your doctor's directions for using ear drops and take all doses of antibiotic medicine as prescribed. Keep taking these for all days of treatment, even if you are starting to feel better. If you stop too soon, the infection could come back. You should use acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Motrin) for ear pain.

Although swimmer's ear typically improves after 7-10 days of treatment, the skin of the ear canal often takes longer to return to normal with its water-proof barriers. To protect your ear while it heals and to prevent the infection from coming back, your doctor will probably tell you to keep your head out of water (no swimming or water sports) for several days after you stop the treatment and sometimes a few weeks — even while showering or shampooing! This is very important since recurrent swimmer's ear may turn into chronic infections. This can be tough, but your doctor can give you suggestions on how to do this, such as using a cotton ball with Vaseline as an earplug during shower or bath.

Preventing or treating otitis externa means keeping your ear dry:

- Doc's Proplugs, which are found at surf or dive shops, and have various sizes. If these are not an option for your child, try Ear Putty, available at most pharmacies.
- Custom-made molds are available through Rady Children's Speech and Hearing Department (858-966-8100). Please note: These molds are NOT covered by insurance and require an appointment to make.
- Ear bands to help keep the ear plug in are available at www.earbandit.com.
- Mac's ear dryer – to be used after any activity which involves water – bathing, swimming, showering.