

Swimmer's Ear

Otitis externa - commonly 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 can be caused by many different types of bacteria or fungi.

The infection commonly occurs in children who spend a lot of time in the water. Too much moisture in the ear can irritate and break down the skin in the canal, allowing bacteria or fungi to penetrate. In temperate climates, otitis externa occurs more frequently during the summer months, when swimming is more common.

But you don't have to swim to get swimmer's ear. Anything that causes a break in the skin of the ear canal can lead to an infection. Dry skin or eczema scratching the ear canal, vigorous ear cleaning with cotton-tipped applicators, or inserting foreign objects like Q-tips or paper clips into the ear can all increase the risk of developing otitis externa.

Signs and Symptoms

The primary symptom of otitis externa is ear pain, which can be severe and gets worse when the earlobe or other exterior part of the ear is touched or moved. It may also be painful for a person with otitis externa to

chew. Sometimes the ear canal itches before the pain begins.

Swelling of the ear canal may make your child complain of a full or uncomfortable feeling in the ear. There

may be some discharge as well; it may be clear at first but then turn cloudy, yellowish, and pus-like. Hearing

may temporarily be affected if pus and debris or swelling of the canal blocks the passage of sound into the ear.

Fever is not common in typical cases of otitis externa

Professional Treatment

Although uncommon, severe or untreated otitis externa may spread to the cartilage and bone around the ear

canal, so prompt treatment by a doctor is important.

Treatment of otitis externa depends on the severity of the infection and how much pain the child feels. For

milder cases, we will prescribe eardrops that contain antibiotics to fight the infection and a steroid to reduce

swelling of the ear canal. Eardrops are usually given several times a day for 4 to 7 days.

If swelling of the ear canal makes it difficult to give the drops, we may insert a cotton wick into the canal to

help carry the medicine inside the ear. The wick needs to be kept moist with the prescribed ear drops and may require reapplication of the drops every few hours. With a severe swimmer's ear, we will also prescribe pain relievers by mouth.

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Swimmer's Ear (continued)

Prevention

Swimmer's ear can be prevented, easily and effectively. Remember, it is caused by water remaining in the ear

canal for an extended period of time after swimming or shampooing. It does not matter if the water comes from

the pool, a pond or the ocean. Even sterile water can lead to a swimmer's ear!

Removing all of the water from the ear canals before bed will effectively prevent swimmer's ear. At the end of

a day's swimming, simply pour a capful of plain rubbing alcohol into the ear, wiggle the ear, and let the alcohol

run out. Then repeat with the other ear.

The rubbing alcohol will "cut" the water and the alcohol will evaporate, leaving a clean, dry ear. The alcohol

will feel cold, but not hurt. If the child complains of pain, it means they may already have swimmer's ear. Just

a little suggestion: buy a plastic bottle of rubbing alcohol – it will not break when dropped. Also take great care

when using the rubbing alcohol not to let it run into the eyes!

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