

SWIMMER'S EAR (OTITIS EXTERNA)

What is otitis externa?

Otitis externa is an infection of the ear canal. Otitis externa is also called swimmer's ear.

How does it occur?

Bacteria and sometimes fungi may cause the infection. It can result from an injury, as might occur if you use a Q-tip to clean your ear canal. It can also be caused by dirty water in your ears (for example, from a lake or ocean). Frequent showering or swimming can increase the risk of getting an infection. Otitis externa often occurs in the summer from swimming in polluted water. The chemicals in hair spray or hair dye may irritate the ear canal as well and increase the risk of infection.

Some people get otitis externa repeatedly, especially if they clean their ears too vigorously. People who have skin allergies also seem particularly prone to otitis externa.

What are the symptoms?

- Symptoms include:
- itching (often the first symptom)
- pain and swelling in ear canal, particularly with movement of the ear by chewing, pulling or lying on it.
- Discharge from the ear, which may smell bad
- Crusting around the ear canal opening.
- Sometimes swelling or pus may decrease your hearing.

How is it treated?

Your provider will carefully clean and dry your ear. If your ear is very swollen, he or she may insert a wick soaked with an antibiotic into the ear to get the medicine into the infected area. You may need to put drops in your ear several times a day to keep the wick moist. Your medication is . Use 4-5 drops in the affected ear(s) twice daily for at least 7 days. Warm the bottle in your hands before putting the drops in your ear. Using warm ear drops may keep you from getting dizzy when the drops go in. Moving the earlobe back and forth after putting the drops in can help the medicine go deep into the ear canal.

How long will the effects last?

The pain and swelling will go away gradually as the antibiotics or other medications take effect. Most cases of otitis externa clear up completely in 5 to 7 days.

How can I take care of myself?

- Follow your doctor's directions carefully and use all of your medicines. OE can be hard to treat. Here are some things that will help you get better:
- Keep your ear as dry as possible for 7 to 10 days. Take baths instead of showers. Try to keep water out of your ears when you wash your hair. Don't swim or play other water sports. If you're on a swim team, ask your doctor before you return to swimming.
- Don't put anything except the prescribed medicine in your ears. Scratching and rubbing will only make OE worse.
- Symptoms are usually much better in 3-4 days. They should be completely gone in 10 days. If you're not better by then, call your doctor.
- How can I help prevent otitis externa?
- The best way to prevent OE is to keep the ear canal's natural defenses against infection working well.

Follow these tips:

- Never put anything in the ear canal (cotton swabs, paper clips, liquids or sprays, or even your finger). This can damage or irritate the skin. If your ears itch a lot, see your doctor.
- Leave ear wax alone. If you think your ear wax affects your hearing, see your doctor to be sure there's no other cause.
- Keep your ears as dry as possible. Use a towel to dry your ears well after swimming or showering. Help the water run out of your ears by turning your head to each side and pulling the earlobe in different directions. A hair dryer set on the lowest heat and speed can also help to dry ears. Be sure to hold it several inches from your ear. If you swim or surf, use a bathing cap or wet suit hood to keep water out of your ears.
- Drying ear drops: Use an over-the-counter ear drying agent that contains isopropyl alcohol (rubbing alcohol), such as Auro-Dri or Swim Ear, or one with acetic acid and aluminum acetate (Star-Otic). If you like, you might also create your own homemade Swimmer's Ear prevention solution by mixing equal parts of rubbing alcohol and white vinegar, and putting it in your child's ears after swimming.

(Adapted from "Otitis Externa," Published by McKesson Provider Technologies.)