

## Education

### Otitis Externa (Swimmer's Ear)

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
- 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 diagnosed?

Your health care provider will examine your ears. He or she may take a sample of pus and culture it to identify the bacteria or fungus.

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 health care provider may prescribe an oral antibiotic if you have a severe infection.

Your provider may suggest a cream or ointment medicine for some types of infection.

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 the treatment plan prescribed by your health care provider. Your health care provider will tell you how to take care of your ear and how to remove the wick.
- Keep water out of your ears until the infection is completely gone.
- Take baths instead of showers.
- Ask your health care provider how you should protect your ears when you wash your hair.

How can I help prevent otitis externa?

- Don't put anything into your ear canal that should not be put there. This includes Q-tips. Q-tips are for cleaning the outer ear, not the ear canal.
- Ask your health care provider if it might help to wear earplugs or use something such as lamb's wool to keep your ears dry when you swim and shower.
- Dry your ears carefully if you get water in them. You can use a hair dryer (on the "warm" setting) at least 6 inches from your ear to help dry the water in the ear canal.
- Avoid any substance that may cause an allergic reaction of the ear canal skin. Read product labels carefully and ask your health care provider before you use chemicals or medications in the area around your ear.

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