

Otitis Externa

“Swimmer’s ear”

This handout explains what otitis externa is. It also gives information about its causes, symptoms, and treatments.

What is otitis externa?

Otitis externa is often called “swimmers ear.” It is an infection of the external ear canal. It can be caused by many different types of germs.

Causes of otitis externa include:

- Spending a lot of time in the water (moisture in the ear canal can irritate and weaken the skin, and this can lead to an infection)
- Dry skin or eczema
- Cleaning your ear too harshly with a cotton swab (Q-tip)
- Scratching your ear canal
- Inserting foreign objects into your ear canal



Spending a lot of time in water is one cause of otitis externa.

Certain health conditions also increase the risk of getting an ear canal infection or make it harder to treat. These include diabetes, a weakened immune system, or having radiation that involved the ear canals.

What are the symptoms of otitis externa?

The main symptoms of otitis externa are a feeling of fullness in the ear and mild to severe ear pain. This pain is usually worse when the outer part of the ear is touched or pulled. Another common symptom is itching in the ear canal.

The skin inside the ear canal can swell and there may be a discharge coming out of the canal opening. The outer ear may also become swollen and red. Lymph nodes around the ear can become enlarged or tender and the skin over them may split and weep. Hearing may become affected from the swelling and discharge or debris that collects inside the ear canal.

There may or may not be fever with this type of ear infection. Some patients have mild dizziness caused by pressure inside the ear canal.

How is otitis externa diagnosed?

Your health care provider can diagnose otitis externa by examining your ear canal and eardrum with special equipment. If you have discharge and debris inside your ear canal, it will be gently removed using a small suction device. Your provider may take a *culture* (a small sample of the discharge or debris in your ear canal) to test. This will show what type of germ is causing your infection.

How is it treated?

How your otitis externa is treated depends on the type of infection you have. Most external ear canal infections are caused by common germs that are easily treated with medicine.

Your ear canal infection may be treated with:

- Cleaning your outer ear often and using eardrops that your provider prescribes
- Oral antibiotics, especially if the area behind your ear drum (the middle ear) is also infected
- Steroid eardrops, if there is a lot of swelling inside your ear canal

If you have swelling inside your ear canal that makes it hard to put in eardrops, your provider may insert a small cotton wick into your ear. This wick will help carry the medicine into your ear canal.

Non-prescription (over-the-counter) pain medicines are usually strong enough to treat any pain. Three of these medicines are ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), acetaminophen (Tylenol), and naproxen (Aleve, Naprosyn). For most people, symptoms improve 7 to 10 days after treatment begins.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns.

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After hours and on weekends and holidays, call 206-598-6190 and ask for the Otolaryngology resident on call to be paged.