



SWIMMER'S EAR

What is swimmer's ear?

Swimmer's ear, or acute otitis externa, is an infection or irritation of the ear canal skin. Often it occurs when moisture is trapped in the ear canal and bacteria that normally live on the skin of the ear canal multiply, leading to infection. If the skin is scraped or scratched, chances of infection may increase.

What are the signs/symptoms of swimmer's ear?

- Severe ear pain that worsens when the earlobe is touched or moved
- Itching in the ear canal
- Yellow-green drainage from ear
- Muffled hearing
- Fever
- Swollen lymph nodes surrounding the ear or in the upper neck

What other factors contribute to swimmer's ear?

Children or adults who have otitis externa usually have a history of diving or swimming under water for long periods of time, especially in polluted lakes, rivers, or ponds. For this reason, it occurs most often during the summer months, and most often in older children and young adults; however, an adult at any age can acquire this ear infection.

Children or adults who do not swim can also develop otitis externa by scratching the ear canal when they try to clean their ears by using Q-tips or dangerously sharp small objects, like hair clips or bobby pins. Other considerations include irritation from hearing aid use, using water irrigation to remove wax, and eczema or chemical irritation in the ear canals.

How can I prevent swimmer's ear?

Avoid putting objects into your ears - including ear plugs or cotton - except as directed by your doctor. Do not try to clean your ears, especially using straight stiff objects, like Q-tips or bobby pins. Instead, have your ears cleaned periodically by your Ear, Nose, and Throat physician as needed. Keep your ears dry; you may use a dry towel or hair dryer at a low heat level to dry your ears after swimming or bathing. Rubbing alcohol or a mixture of half rubbing alcohol and half vinegar may be used at the end of the swimming day for a child or adult who does not have ear tubes or a hole in their eardrum.

How is swimmer's ear treated?

Swimmer's ear is typically treated with careful cleaning of the ear canal by your Ear, Nose, and Throat provider and with the use of ear drops (e.g. Cortisporin, Floxin, Ciprodex), and/or oral antibiotics, depending on the severity of the infection. If it is treated with medication, swimmer's ear usually resolves within 7 to 10 days. It is often recommended to keep water out of the infected ear for up to 14 days, even when showering. Use putty plugs or a cotton ball lightly coated with Vaseline to do this. If left untreated, swimmer's ear may spread to nearby cartilage and surrounding bone.

If the opening into the ear is narrowed by swelling, an Otowick (a type of medical sponge) may be placed into the ear canal by your Ear, Nose, and Throat physician to help the antibiotic drops reach the inside of the ear more effectively. For more severe infections, oral antibiotics are given as well, and a culture of ear discharge may be taken to help identify which bacteria is causing the infection.