

Otitis externa

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Introduction

Otitis externa is an ear infection in the ear canal, which runs from the eardrum to the outer ear. Otitis externa may be caused by bacterial or fungal infection in the ear canal. The most common symptom of otitis externa is pain that may spread to the outside of the face. This ear infection is often called 'swimmer's ear' but does not just happen to people who swim; it can happen anytime water remains in the ear canal, creating a moist environment that aids in the growth of bacteria and/or fungi.

What can cause otitis externa?

An outer ear infection happens when the skin in the ear canal gets irritated or scratched and then gets infected. This can happen when a person:

- Puts cotton swabs, fingers, or other things like hearing aids, headphones or earplugs inside the ear canal.
- Cleans the ear canal to remove ear wax and damages the skin.
- Swims regularly – water can soften the ear canal's skin, allowing bacteria or fungi to infect the skin more easily. Moisture in the ear canal creates an ideal environment for bacterial or fungal growth.
- Swims in or is exposed to contaminated water.

Symptoms of otitis externa

- Ear pain – if not treated, it may get worse and radiate outwards to the side of the face
- Itchiness inside the ear

- Drainage from the ear – this may be clear and odourless or become yellow or green pus oozing from the ear that may have a foul smell
- Blocked ear
- Redness and swelling in the outer ear
- Temporary hearing loss or decreased and muffled hearing in the affected ear
- Slight fever
- Swollen lymph nodes around the ear or upper neck

How to prevent otitis externa

- Keep ears dry by draining water from the ear canal after swimming and drying with a soft towel.
- Don't swim in lakes or rivers where the bacterial counts are not known.
- Protect the ears while swimming and when using products like hairspray and hair dyes.
- Avoid putting foreign objects in the ear. Never attempt to scratch an itch or dig out earwax with items such as a cotton swab, paper clip or hairpin. Using these items can pack material deeper into the ear canal, irritate the thin skin inside the ear or break the skin.
- Remove excess earwax by seeing a doctor or using an at-home cleaning method rather than digging it out.

Treatment

Otitis externa may resolve on its own but is typically treated with antibiotic ear drops. If it is very painful, taking over-the-counter

Table 1: Drops to treat and prevent otitis externa

Use	Product	Directions
Softens wax	Cerumol® Ear Drops	Instil 5 drops into the ear 10–30 minutes before syringing
	Waxsol® Ear Drops	Instil 10 drops into the ear on 2 consecutive nights before syringing
To dry the ear	Swim Seal™ Ear Drops	Instil 2–3 drops into each ear before water exposure
	Clicks Swimmers Ear drops	Tilt the head to one side and apply 4–5 drops in the affected ear, then tilt the head to the opposite side to allow excess liquid to run out.

(OTC) pain medication will offer some relief. OTC drying drops can also be used as prevention and initial treatment, but medical attention should be sought if there is no relief.

The goal of treatment is to stop the infection and allow the ear canal to heal.

It is important to keep the inside of the ear dry while the infection heals. Wearing hearing aids or headphones, or putting anything into the infected ear, should also be avoided until symptoms improve.

A homemade cure can be mixed from a solution of half rubbing alcohol and half vinegar. The alcohol combines with water in the ear and then evaporates, removing the water, while the acidity of the vinegar keeps bacteria from growing. Apply a couple of drops of solution in each ear, e.g. after swimming. This home remedy is recommended for those with repeat infections.

For the more serious cases, the patient may require antibiotic or antifungal ear drops that would require a prescription.

Analgesic (only if the eardrum is not perforated)	Aurone Ear Drops	Instil 5–10 drops, 2 hourly as needed
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