



OTITIS EXTERNA – SWIMMERS EAR

What is Otitis Externa?

Otitis Externa, also known as Swimmer's Ear, is an infection in the external ear canal. These infections usually start quickly, within 48 hours. The symptoms often include pain and swelling in the front (tragus, and pinna) of the ear, drainage, a plugged feeling, itching, pain with jaw movement, neck pain/swelling, and surrounding skin infection (cellulitis). This infection can occur at any age.

What Causes Otitis Externa?

Normally, there is a protective, wax coating (cerumen) covering the ear canal. Wax prevents infection by being acidic and containing antibiotic enzymes. Otitis externa often results from a breakdown of this protective barrier and can be caused by a variety of factors that alter this barrier. Causes include: excessive wetness from swimming, showers, aggressive cleaning with Q tips, soapy deposits, alkaline eardrops or perspiration can cause a bacterial or fungal infection. Trauma from Q Tips can cause micro-breaks in the skin and lead to infection. Otitis externa is more common in warmer climates. Patients with diabetes are much more likely to get an otitis externa when their sugars are high. Some dermatologic conditions and allergies can predispose to infection as well. Over 98% of otitis externa is caused by bacteria (*Pseudomonas* most commonly), but fungus can cause the other 2%.

How is Otitis Externa Treated?

The main treatment for otitis externa is debriding the ear canal and topical ear drops (antibiotic, antifungal, or both). If the ear canal is too swollen to allow drops, than an otowick is often placed to stent the ear canal open so that drops can reach the entire length of the canal. If there is surrounding skin infection, the patient may be put on oral antibiotics along with drops. Because one of the most helpful treatments is debridement, you may need to see your physician every few days/weeks until the infection is gone.

What to do during your infection:

- Keep your ears dry at all times.
- When in the shower, put a cotton ball in your ear canal and then cover with Vaseline
- No swimming
- Call your doctor if your ear feels plugged or the pain/pressure is not improved after 3 days of treatment

What to do in the future to prevent otitis externa:

- Do not use Q tips and avoid other trauma to the ear canal
- Limit water accumulation and moisture in the ear
- Diabetics should work on controlling their blood sugar
- Routinely have your ear wax removed if it is a problem
- Use acidifying ear drops shortly before swimming or ear plugs during swimming.

Jeffrey S. Weingarten, M.D. C. Bart Dickson, M.D. Michael E. Stone, M.D. Robert T. Standing, M.D.