

OTITIS EXTERNA (SWIMMER'S EAR)

Swimmer's ear is an infection of the skin lining the ear canal. The ear canal becomes red and tender. In more severe cases there may be quite a bit of swelling and drainage of blood or pus. Moving or touching the earlobe causes pain. The ear may feel itchy or "plugged up".

The ear canal needs to be dry. With prolonged swimming or when water is trapped in the ear canal, the lining becomes swollen and prone to infection. One is more likely to get swimmer's ear from swimming pools than from a lake or ocean. The chlorine in pool water kills all the helpful bacteria that normally live on the skin of the ear canal, and then harmful bacteria tend to take over. Also, the warmer the water, the more likely it is for an infection to occur.

TREATMENT:

Most cases of swimmer's ear are treated with antibiotic ear drops. Have the child lie on his side and put about 4 drops of the medicine into the opening of the ear canal. Repeat this procedure four times a day for a week (or for at least 48 hours after there is no more ear pain). You may also give acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol) or ibuprofen (e.g. Advil) for pain.

Generally, your child should not swim until the pain is gone. If she is on a swim team, she may continue, but should use the ear drops as a rinse after each swimming session. A swim cap can also be worn.

In severe cases, there may be too much swelling or too much pus in the ear canal to get enough of the ear drops to the infected area. In these cases, the doctor may need to clean out the ear canal, insert a "wick" (absorbent piece of material that carries the ear drops to where they are needed), or prescribe an oral antibiotic. Therefore, if your child shows no improvement after 3-4 days on the ear drops, please schedule another appointment.

PREVENTION:

The key to prevention is keeping the ear canals dry when your child is not swimming. After swimming, get all the water out of the ear canals by turning the head to the side and pulling the earlobe in different directions to help the water run out. Dry the opening to the ear canal carefully with a towel. Do not use a cotton swab (Q-tip). Long, wet hair can continue to drip water back into the ear canal, so a hair dryer should be used if this is a problem.

Although earplugs sound like a good idea, in reality they seldom work. They may jam earwax back into the ear which can then trap water in the ear. Also, it's very difficult to find tight fitting earplugs that don't leak.

If swimmer's ear becomes recurrent, you may want to put preventive ear drops into the ear before and after swimming.

There are several brands available in most pharmacies, including Star-Otic, Swim Ear, Aqua

Ear, Ear
You may also
yourself by
tablespoon of
(white
one tablespoon
(rubbing

Magic, etc.
make the drops
mixing one
acetic acid
vinegar) with
of isopropanol
alcohol).

