

SWIMMER'S EAR



Swimmer's ear is an infection of the ear canal. In most cases, bacteria cause this infection in the thin layer of skin lining the canal.

Your ears' protective features work best when they are dry. If your ear canals are exposed to excess moisture — for example, if you swim a lot — they're more likely to become infected. Swimmer's ear is also known as acute external otitis or otitis externa.

Swimmer's ear symptoms are usually mild at the onset of swimmer's ear, but they may get worse if the infection isn't treated or spreads.

First signs and symptoms:

- * Itching in ear canal
- * Slight redness of skin in ear canal
- * Mild discomfort
- * Some drainage of odorless fluid

Moderate disease progression:

- * Redness of skin
- * Excessive fluid drainage
- * Discharge of pus
- * Pain that worsens on moving your outer ear (pinna, or auricle) or pushing on the little "bump" (tragus) in front of your ear
- * Feeling of fullness in your ear
- * Decreased or muffled hearing



Severe disease progression:

- * Severe pain
- * Swelling in your ear or lymph nodes in your neck
- * Redness or swelling of outer ear
- * Scaly or flaking skin of outer ear

When to see a doctor:

See a doctor if you're experiencing any signs or symptoms of swimmer's ear, even if they are mild. If you're experiencing severe pain or have a fever, Call your doctor right away or visit the emergency room.

Swimmer's ear is usually easily treated. Prompt treatment of swimmer's ear can help prevent the development of more-serious complications and infections.

Prevention:

Your ear canals have features that help keep them clean and prevent infection. Glands in the canal secrete a waxy substance (cerumen) that provides protection through several means:

- Cerumen creates a thin, water-repelling film on the skin of the ear canal.
- It's an acidic substance, which creates an unfriendly environment for bacterial growth.
- It contains some proteins that act as mild antibacterial agents.
- It collects dirt, dead skin cells and other debris and transports them out of the ear canal. This waxy clump is the familiar earwax you find at the opening of your ear canal.

Another protective feature of the ear canal is its shape. The canal slopes slightly downward from the middle ear to the outer ear. This helps water drain out of the ear.

A breakdown of defenses:

If you have swimmer's ear, the defenses of the ear canal have been overrun. Bacteria have easier access to the skin of the inner ear if:

- Excess moisture in the ear — from a lot of swimming, trapped water or humid weather — has thinned out the cerumen and made it less acidic.
- There's a break or abrasion in the skin from scratching with a cotton swab, hairpin or other object in the ear.
- You have a rash caused by sensitivity to hair products or jewellery.

Swimmer's ear is most often an infection caused by bacteria that are common in the environment. Infections caused by fungi or viruses are less common.

Factors that may increase your risk of swimmer's ear include:



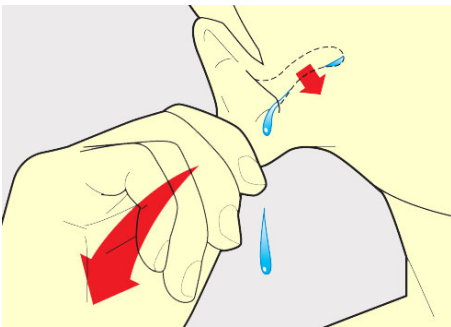
- Swimming
- Swimming in water with higher bacteria levels, such as a lake rather than a well-maintained pool
- Small ear canal, such as a child's ear canal, that can trap water more easily
- Excessive earwax that traps water in the ear canal
- Excessive cleaning of the ear canal
- Scraping or scratching of the ear canal with objects, such as cotton swabs
- Devices that may trap water, such as a hearing aid or swim cap
- Skin allergies from jewelry or other allergic agents
- Skin irritation from hair spray or hair dyes



Follow these tips to avoid swimmer's ear:

Keep your ears dry.

- Dry your ears thoroughly after exposure to moisture from swimming or bathing.



ear.

- Dry only your outer ear slowly and gently with a soft towel or cloth.
- Tip your head to the side to help water drain from your ear canal.
- You can dry your ears with a blow-dryer if you put it on the lowest setting and hold it at least a foot (0.3 meter) away from the

At-home preventive treatment.

- If you know you don't have a punctured eardrum, you can use a homemade preventive eardrop before and after swimming.

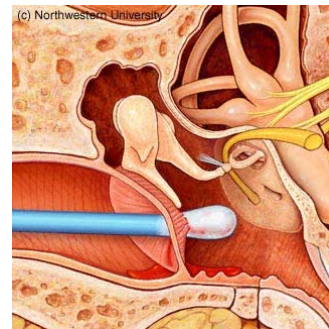
- A mixture of 1 part white vinegar and 1 part rubbing alcohol may help prevent the growth of bacteria and fungi that can cause swimmer's ear.
- Pour 1 teaspoon (5 milliliters) of the solution into each ear and let it drain back out. Similar over-the-counter solutions may be available at your drugstore.

Swim wisely.

- Avoid swimming in polluted water.

Avoid putting foreign objects in your ear.

- Never attempt to dig out excess or hardened earwax with items such as a cotton swab, paper clip or hairpin.
- Using these items can pack material deeper into your ear canal, irritate the thin skin inside your ear or scratch the skin.
- They can also puncture the ear drum, causing permanent damage and potential hearing loss



Protect your ears.

- Avoid substances that may irritate your ears, such as hair sprays and hair dyes.
- Or put cotton balls in your ears when applying these products.

Use caution after ear infection or surgery.

- If you've recently had an ear infection or ear surgery, talk to your doctor before you swim.

Any questions – call Mary Paillé RN, Community Health Nurse 247-2012 x 25

Resource:

The Mayo Clinic

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/swimmers-ear/D500473>