
Otitis Externa / Itchy Ear Information:

Otitis externa is a condition in which the skin lining the outer ear canal becomes red and swollen due to infection. This infection occurs commonly because of water entering the ear canal and is sometimes referred to as 'swimmer's ear'. In the tropics, the heat and high humidity cause people to perspire excessively in summer, and this moisture may also play a part in causing otitis externa or 'tropical ear'. It tends to be more troublesome during September to November and February to April.

Symptoms:

Pain and tenderness of the ear canal are typical, and in severe cases the pain and tenderness may spread to the outer ear and surrounding skin. Other symptoms include discharge from the outer ear canal, itching and reduced hearing. Pain when chewing is also common.

Causes:

Water entering the outer ear canal can drain only through the ear hole. The outer ear canal is horizontal and curved; it may contain wax. Water may not drain freely and can cause skin to become soggy, so allowing bacteria or fungi, normally present on the skin, to cause infection. In addition the use of cotton buds in the ear pushes wax into the ear and causes microscopic tears in the skin, allowing the bacteria to progress further. We advise avoiding cotton bud use.

Who gets it?

You are more likely to suffer from otitis externa if your outer ear canal is narrow or long, or if the skin lining the canal is in poor condition (i.e. if it is not waterproofed by the wax and is wet by regular swimming). Incidentally, chlorinated fresh water is more damaging than salt water. The skin lining will deteriorate too if it is prone to dermatitis or eczema and if exposed to chemicals (e.g. hair shampoo, hair dyes and ear ointments). The ear canal can be damaged by attempting to clean it with a hairpin, toothpick or cotton bud.

Treatment:

The basis of successful treatment is to clean the canal and keep it empty and dry. **In mild cases** your doctor will treat the infection by cleaning the outer ear canal using suction or a probe and then prescribing cream or drops to insert several times a day. The treatment is used for about 5 days and contains chemicals that kill the bacteria or fungus causing the infection. No water should get in the ear while it is being treated.

If the infection is severe and the outer ear canal is swollen, the doctor may insert a foam wick into the ear canal. This will swell up and prevent further swelling and allow antibiotic drops to reach the infection deep in the canal. Rarely intravenous treatment is needed. The wick may fall out on its own as swelling improves or should be removed at 2-4days.





Fungal Infection: This ... occurs when the natural balance of the ear canal has been altered by previous antibiotic drop use. The ear is ... itchy and blocked, but not particularly painful. It should be treated with clearance of the debris, swab, and ear drops targeting fungus. Fungal ear infections are more likely to result in ear drum perforation if not adequately treated.

Prevention of otitis externa:

- Avoid getting water in your ear. (If water enters, shake it out or use Aquaeear drops).
- Avoid poking objects such as hairpins and cotton buds in the ear to clean the canal
- Use moulded earplugs or a bathing cap when swimming, showering and washing hair
- The ear usually cleans itself naturally. Do not attempt to clean it and risk infection
- If you have a problem, contact your doctor for advice and treatment.

Itchy Ears: Itchiness of the ear is most commonly due to a prolonged skin inflammation (chronic dermatitis) of the ear canal, a condition similar to dandruff in the scalp; the wax is flaky, dry, and plentiful. Sometimes it may be caused by a fungus or allergy. Interestingly some foods (eg greasy foods, sugar and starches) may aggravate the condition, thus patients may try to avoid these. A steroid eardrop maybe prescribed to be used for a few days at bedtime when the ears itch.

Using EAR drops: Lie on the opposite ear and place the drops in ear. Gently “pump” the drops into the ear (by pushing on the skin in front of the ear canal 5-10 times), and continue to lie on the opposite ear for 1-2 minutes. This will ensure that the drops get into the deep parts of the infected canal. (Do not “pump” the drops in if there is a wick in position.) You should avoid water in the ear when using ear drops.

