

What is Swimmer's Ear?

Swimmer's ear (also called otitis externa) is a type of ear infection. It is an infection of the outer ear and the ear canal. Because the canal is dark and warm, it can easily get infected with bacteria and fungus. Swimmer's ear is different from the kind of infection you get in the middle part of your ear. That kind of infection is called otitis media.

What Causes Swimmer's Ear?

Several things can make swimmer's ear more likely, including the following:

- If you swim or shower a lot, too much water can get into your ears. Water removes the protective ear wax, which makes it easier for germs and fungus to grow.
- Cleaning your ears can remove the protective wax layer and lead to infection
- If you injure the skin in the ear canal by putting your finger or some object (such as a cotton swab or a pencil) in your ear, an infection can develop in the canal.
- Skin conditions (such as psoriasis) that occur in other parts of the body can also occur in the ear canal and cause an infection.
- Bacteria from products you use in your hair (such as hairspray and hair dye) can get trapped in the ear canal and cause an ear infection.

What does Swimmer's Ear feel like?

Symptoms of swimmer's ear include:

- Pain or itching in the outer part of the ear (the pain is often worse when the ear moves, such as when you are chewing or the "tell-tale" sign of pain when tugging on the lobe of the ear)
- Swelling of the ear
- A stuffy or plugged-up feeling in the affected ear
- Pus accumulating or draining from the affected ear
- Decreased or muffled hearing

How do you Prevent Swimmer's Ear?

A dry ear is unlikely to become infected, so it is important to keep the ears free of moisture after swimming or bathing. Removable earplugs, sometimes worn for hearing protection, can be used to keep moisture out of the ear canal. Q-tips should not be used for this purpose, because they may pack material deeper into the ear canal, remove protective earwax, and irritate the thin skin of the ear canal creating the perfect environment for infection. The safest way to dry your ears is with a hair dryer. Over-the-counter drops, rubbing alcohol or a 50:50 mixture of alcohol and vinegar used as eardrops will evaporate excess water and keep your ears dry.

Treatment of Swimmer's Ear:

Once ears are infected, if you do not have a perforated ear drum, ear cleaning may be helped by antibiotic drops prescribed by your doctor. If the ear canal is swollen shut, a sponge or wick may be placed in the ear canal so that the antibiotic drops will be effective. Pain medication may also be prescribed. Usually physicians tell their patients no swimming or getting the ear wet for a period of a week or so. Follow-up appointments with your physician are very important to monitor progress of the infection, to repeat ear cleaning, and to replace the ear wick as needed.