

## Swimmer's Ear

**WARNING:** If you already have an ear infection, or if you have ever had a perforated or otherwise injured eardrum, or ear surgery, you should consult an ear, nose, and throat specialist before you go swimming and before you use any type of ear drops. If you do not know if you have or ever had a perforated, punctured, ruptured, or otherwise injured eardrum, ask your ear doctor.

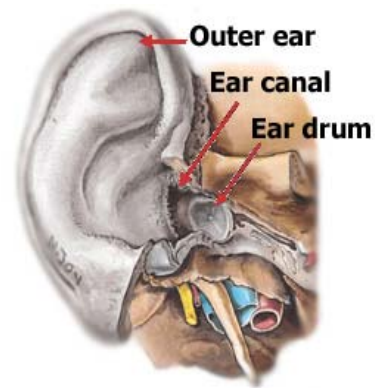
### Causes Of Swimmer's Ear

Swimmer's ear is an infection of the outer ear structures. It typically occurs in swimmers, but the since the cause of the infection is water trapped in the ear canal, bathing or showering may also cause this common infection. When water is trapped in the ear canal, bacteria that normally inhabit the skin and ear canal multiply, causing infection and irritation of the ear canal. If the infection progresses it may involve the outer ear.

### Symptoms Of Swimmer's Ear

The most common symptoms of swimmer's ear are mild to moderate pain that is aggravated by tugging on the auricle and an itchy ear. Other symptoms may include any of the following:

- Sensation that the ear is blocked or full
- Drainage
- Fever
- Decreased hearing
- Intense pain that may radiate to the neck, face, or side of the head
- The outer ear may appear to be pushed forward or away from the skull
- Swollen lymph nodes



### Treatment Of Swimmer's Ear

Treatment for the early stages of swimmer's ear includes careful cleaning of the ear canal and eardrops that inhibit bacterial growth. Mild acid solutions such as boric or acetic acid are effective for early infections.

For more severe infections, if you do not have a perforated ear drum, ear cleaning may be helped by antibiotics. 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.

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. Your

Otolaryngologist has specialized equipment and expertise to effectively clean the ear canal and treat swimmer's ear.

### Prevention Of 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. *If you do not have a perforated eardrum*, rubbing alcohol or a 50:50 mixture of alcohol and vinegar used as eardrops will evaporate excess water and keep your ears dry.

**Before using any drops in the ear, it is important to verify that you do not have a perforated eardrum. Check with your otolaryngologist if you have ever had a perforated, punctured, or injured eardrum, or if you have had ear surgery.**

People with itchy ears, flaky or scaly ears, or extensive earwax are more likely to develop swimmer's ear. If so, it may be helpful to have your ears cleaned periodically by an otolaryngologist.

### Preventing Swimmer's Ear

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You don't have to be a swimmer to get swimmer's ear. Athletes who frequently get water or perspiration in their ears are susceptible to the condition. Staying in a pool too long can reduce the acid level of the ear wax, which is there to help resist infections.

Swimmer's ear (otitis externa) is actually one of several names that refer to an infection of the outer ear. It can be caused by a fungus, but is more commonly associated with bacteria that is brought into the ear with water. If the water then runs out, the ear and the bacteria dry up. But when some of the water remains trapped in the ear canal and the skin gets soggy, the bacteria are in a perfect environment to grow into a problem.

## **SYMPTOMS**

The first symptoms are a feeling that the ear is blocked, muffled hearing, and an itch. Later, the canal can become swollen and painful, and a watery discharge accumulates in the area. If the ear gets to the point of being tender to the touch, it's time to get to a doctor.

## **PREVENTION**

There are several ways to prevent swimmer's ear from ever occurring. Here is a summary of preventive methods:

- Don't swim in dirty water.
- Wear earplugs while swimming.
- After a swim, tilt and shake your head to allow the water to drain.
- Dry your ears with a clean cloth after showering and with a hair dryer set at low speed, held about 12" from your ear.
- Use one dropper of commercial eardrops, isopropyl alcohol, or white vinegar in your ear after swimming or showering. Wiggle your ear to let the solution get to the bottom, then let the fluid drain out. Drops should not be used by people with tubes in their ears or perforations in their eardrums.
- Some experts suggest that you use a dropper of mineral oil, baby oil, or lanolin to create a protective coating before you exercise. Get advice from a physician or trainer before using this method.
- If you wear a hearing aid, remove it frequently to allow your ear to dry.
- Avoid excessive cleaning that removes all of the protective wax naturally present in the ear canal.

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