

# Otitis Externa

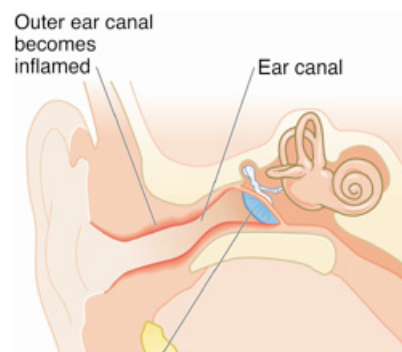
Otitis externa is a condition in which the skin lining the outer ear canal becomes red and swollen due to infection. It is more common in adults than children, and is also known as 'Swimmer's Ear', due to a common association with water exposure.

## Symptoms:

- Pain, tenderness and itching of the ear canal. In severe cases the pain, swelling and redness may spread to the outer ear and surrounding skin.
- Discharge from the ear canal.
- Reduced hearing.

## Causes:

- Water exposure: water entering the outer ear canal can contain bacteria, and may not drain freely. This allows overgrowth and infection to occur by bacteria or fungi.
- Local trauma: the use of cotton buds (or other 'ear scratchers' like bobby pins etc) in the ear causes microscopic tears in the skin, allowing the bacteria into the tissues to cause infection.
- Skin diseases: dermatitis, eczema or psoriasis all cause breaks in the skin of the ear canal, which can also promote infection.
- Excessive heat or humidity: warm, moist environments can result in more infections compared to cool, dry ones.



## Treatment:

The basis of successful treatment is to clean any pus or infected wax out of the ear canal and keep it empty and dry while it recovers.

- In mild cases your doctor will treat the infection by cleaning the outer ear canal and then prescribing antibiotic cream or drops. The treatment is used for about 5-10 days and contains chemicals that kill the bacteria or fungus causing the infection. If you are using the drops in both ears, wipe the tip of the bottle with an alcohol wipe (available from your local chemist) between each side to avoid transferring infection from one side to the others.
- If the infection is more severe, the doctor may insert a cotton wick into the ear canal. This helps to reduce the swelling and allows antibiotic drops to reach the infection deep in the canal. This is then removed after 1-2 weeks.
- Oral or even intravenous antibiotics are only rarely needed.
- Keep the ear meticulously dry until the infection is cured – no swimming or putting your head underwater in the bath. When showering or washing your hair, use a piece of cotton wool covering in Vaseline inside the hollow of your outer ear (see picture) to stop water getting into the ear canal itself. Throw this away after each shower and use a new one each time. Do not use earplugs, as they are likely to prolong the infection.
- DO NOT put anything into the ear canal – cotton buds, pen lids, bobby pins, earplugs – NOTHING. Once the infection is cured, you are not allowed to put anything bigger than your elbow in your ear, or the infection is more likely to come back in the future.
- Hearing aids: if you wear hearing aids, try to keep these out of your ears as much as possible while the infection is treated. Every time you take them out, wipe the surface that is in your ear canal with a wet, soapy cloth, dry it and then wipe the surface with an alcohol wipe. When you are putting it into your ear, wipe the surface again with an alcohol wipe and allow the excess to evaporate before putting them in.



**Using Eardrops:** Lie on your side with the affected ear up, and place the drops in ear. Gently 'pump' the drops into the ear (by pushing on the skin in front of the ear canal 15-20 times), and continue to lie on your side for 1-2 minutes. This will ensure that the drops get into the deep parts of the infected canal.

### **Prevention:**

In most cases, the infection will not return once the ear has been cleaned and appropriate treatment has been used. If you get recurrent infections:

- The ear usually cleans itself naturally, and having some wax in your ears creates an environment that reduces the chance of infection. You do not need to clean your ear canals, and should not do so.
- DO NOT poke objects such as hair pins and cotton buds in the ear to clean the canal – this will just allow any infection present to get worse, and might start a new infection.
- Avoid getting water in your ear. If water enters, shake it out and use a hairdryer set on low heat to dry the inside of the ear canal. Some people benefit from using Swimmer's Ear Drops (available from the chemist, or use the recipe below) after swimming. Use occluding earplugs when swimming, showering and washing hair.
- If you have any underlying skin diseases like psoriasis or eczema, consider using some steroid drops (e.g. Elocon 1% lotion) in the canal each night to keep the skin healthy. Olive oil (2 drops each night each side) can often help in this respect. Stop these and see your doctor if you think you might have an infection.
- If you have any problems, contact your doctor for advice and treatment.

### **Swimmers' Ear Drops Recipe:**

Mix 50ml isopropyl alcohol

With 50ml white vinegar (acetic acid)

Place one dropper full into ear, let sit, and drain daily after swimming or shower.

### **Itchy Ears**

One of the most common causes of itchy ears is use of cotton buds – often, ironically, used to scratch the itch. The microscopic scratches caused by the cotton bud cause itchiness as they heal, and can also promote infection. The infection itself often causes itchiness as well.

Another cause can be inflammation of the skin of the ear canal (from chronic dermatitis, eczema or psoriasis). Interestingly some foods (e.g. greasy foods, sugar and starches) may aggravate the condition, thus you might want to try to avoid these.

A steroid eardrop (Elocon 1% lotion, 2 drops twice a day for two weeks, then as needed if the itch recurs) may be prescribed to reduce the itch at first. Many people find putting a few drops of olive oil in the canal each night can also be very soothing. Heat the oil slightly (by rubbing the dropper between your hands, or in a warm cup of water) will make it less likely to cause dizziness.