

Outer Ear Infection (Otitis Externa)

What is otitis externa?

Otitis externa is an infection of the outer ear caused by bacteria, fungi, or allergies. Otitis externa is also called swimmer's ear.

How does it occur?

Otitis externa can occur from an injury or from contaminated water in your ear canal. Frequent showering or swimming can increase the risk of getting an infection. It often occurs in the summer from swimming in polluted. Hair spray or hair dye may irritate the ear canal skin as well. Some people get otitis externa repeatedly.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms include:

- Itching
- Redness
- Extreme pain and swelling in ear canal
- Foul discharge from the ear
- Crusting around the ear canal opening

In some cases, swelling or pus may affect your hearing.

How is it diagnosed?

The doctor will examine your ears with a viewing instrument. He or she may take a sample of pus and culture it to look for bacteria or fungi.

How is it treated?

Your doctor will carefully clean and dry your ear. If your ear is very swollen, he or she may insert a wick soaked in an antibiotic into the ear to apply the medicine to the infected area. You may need to put drops in your ear several times a day to keep the wick moist.

Your doctor may prescribe an antibiotic in pill form if you have a severe infection. In addition, he or she may suggest a topical medication, such as cream or ointment, for some types of infection.

How long will the effects last?

The pain and swelling will go away gradually as the antibiotics or other medications take effect. Most cases of otitis externa clear up completely in 5 to 7 days.

How can I take care of myself?

The doctor will tell how to take care of your ear and how to remove the wick.

Follow the treatment plan prescribed by the doctor. Also:

- Keep water out of your ears until the infection is completely gone.
- Take baths instead of showers. If you need to wash your hair several times a week, consider washing your hair in a sink instead of in the shower.
- Don't put anything in your ears, including Q-tips, that should not be inserted into the ear canal.

How can I help prevent otitis externa?

- Wear earplugs or use something such as lamb's wool to keep your ears dry when you swim and shower
- Dry your ears carefully if you get water in them. You may want to use a hair dryer.
- Avoid any substance that may cause an allergic reaction of the ear canal skin. Read product labels carefully and ask your doctor before you use chemicals or medications in the area of your ear.

Special Instructions: