

Otitis externa

Emergency Department factsheets

What is otitis externa?

Otitis externa, also known as Swimmer's ear, is an inflammation of the outer ear. The skin which lines the outer ear canal becomes red and swollen due to infection by bacteria (a germ or bug) or fungus. This infection is very common and affects all age groups.

The outer ear canal is a short tunnel that runs from the ear hole to the eardrum inside the ear. It is lined with normal skin which contains hairs and glands that produce wax.

Why does this happen?

Water may enter the outer ear canal and not drain out, like when you go swimming or wash your hair. When the ear canal is wet for a long period of time, the skin becomes soft and 'soggy'. This makes it an ideal environment for bacteria or fungi, which are normally present on the skin, to grow and cause an infection. Other possible causes of infection include:

- cleaning inside the ear canal with cotton buds, fingertips and other objects
- chemicals such as hairsprays, shampoos and hair dyes that may irritate and break the fragile skin, allowing bacteria and fungi to enter
- skin conditions such as eczema or dermatitis where the skin is flaky or broken, and does not act as a protective barrier
- narrow ear canals
- middle-ear infections
- diabetes.

What are the symptoms?

- Pain and tenderness in the ear canal.
- The outer ear may be sensitive and sore, even to the lightest touch or movement.

- Itchiness.
- Foul smelling yellow or green pus in the ear canal.
- A high temperature (fever).
- Reduced hearing.
- Noises inside the ear, such as buzzing, humming or ringing (tinnitus).

Treatment

A swab (sterile cotton wool on a stick) may be taken of the pus to test for bacteria or fungi. Treatment is aimed at cleaning the canal and keeping it dry.

In mild cases a doctor may clean the outer ear canal using a light suction device or a probe and then prescribe an ointment or ear drops for you to use at home.

If the infection is severe, a cotton wick coated with medication may be inserted into the ear canal. You will need to see your doctor two to three times a week for the wick to be changed.

Sometimes antibiotics are needed. Take the full course as prescribed, even if you feel better after a day or two.

Home care

- Keep the ear canal dry by using earplugs or a shower cap while bathing.
- If you have pain, try simple analgesia such as paracetamol and ibuprofen.
- These medications are not suitable for everyone. Speak to your health care professional or pharmacist before taking these medications if you are unsure. Follow the instructions on the product packaging.

- Apply a heat pack to the ear to help ease the pain.

What to expect

Most people experience only minor discomfort. Sometimes the infection is ongoing or keeps coming back. This may cause the ear canal to become narrowed by scar tissue.

Narrow ear canals may also affect hearing. See your local doctor if problems persist or are not getting better.

Follow-up

If you have had a wick inserted into the ear you will need to see your doctor as instructed to change the wick. If there are ongoing problems, your local doctor may refer you to a specialist for further treatment, and to prevent permanent damage.

Prevention

There are a number of steps you can take to prevent otitis externa.

- Avoid getting water into your ears. Wear earplugs or plug your ears with cotton wool coated in Vaseline when bathing and using hair products.
- Avoid swimming in dirty or polluted water.
- Dry your ears well after bathing. Shake the water out or use a hair dryer. You may be advised to use ear drops, which are available at pharmacies.
- Do not poke your fingers or any other objects into your ears. The ear cleans itself naturally.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000). For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

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