

EAR INFECTION, OUTER

(Otitis Externa; Swimmer's Ear)

NOLENSVILLE FAMILY MEDICINE

JOHN R. THOMPSON M.D.

615-776-8088



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

Inflammation (redness and soreness), infection or irritation of the ear canal that extends from the eardrum to the outside. The medical term is otitis externa.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Ear pain that worsens when the earlobe is pulled.
- Itching in the ear.
- Slight fever (sometimes).
- Discharge of pus from the ear.
- Temporary loss of hearing on the affected side.
- A small, painful lump or boil in the ear canal.

CAUSES

- Bacterial (most common) or fungal infection of the delicate skin lining of the ear canal.
- Injury to the ear canal.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Swimming in dirty or polluted water.
- Excess moisture in the ear from any cause.
- Irritation from cotton swabs or metal objects, such as bobby pins.
- Previous ear infections.
- Disorders like diabetes that affect the immune system.
- Use of hair spray or hair dye that may enter the ear canal.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Dry ears completely after they have become wet.
- Wear ear-plugs when swimming.
- Don't clean your ears with any object.
- If you have had otitis externa, ask your health care provider about keeping the prescribed ear-drops on hand. If the ear canals get wet for any reason, such as swimming or shampooing, put drops in both ears at bedtime.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Usually curable with treatment in 7 to 10 days.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Chronic otitis externa. The infection persists or recurs often.
- Spread of infection to bones or cartilage. This is a rare, yet serious complication.



DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Your health care provider can diagnose an outer ear infection by an exam of the ear. Other medical tests are normally not needed.
- Treatment may involve your health care provider cleaning and draining the ear, drug therapy, and other steps to relieve pain.
- Apply heat to the area around the ear to relieve pain. Use a warm washcloth.
- Avoid swimming until the infection clears up.
- Gentle cleaning of the ear canal; remember that a small amount of ear-wax helps protect against infection.
- Keep the infected ear dry. Wear ear-plugs or shower cap for showering.

MEDICATIONS

- You may use acetaminophen or ibuprofen for minor pain. Don't give aspirin to children.
- Your health care provider may prescribe:
 - Eardrops for bacterial infections and cortisone drugs to help other symptoms. An ear wick may be used that allows the drug to reach the end of the ear canal.
 - Oral antibiotics for severe infection.

ACTIVITY

Resume your normal activities as soon as symptoms improve. Avoid getting water in the ears if possible. If you do, dry ears carefully.

DIET

No special diet.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of outer ear infection.
- Pain persists, despite treatment.

Special notes:

More notes on the back of this page