

## **MANAGING YOUR OTITIS EXTERNA**

### **What Is Otitis Externa?**

Otitis externa, or swimmer's ear, is an infection of the delicate skin lining the ear canal. The ear canal goes from the eardrum to the outside of the ear.

People with diabetes mellitus or skin allergies and those whose ears don't make enough wax are also more prone to get this infection.

It usually lasts 7 to 10 days with treatment.

### **What Causes Otitis Externa?**

The cause is bacteria or fungi that infect the lining of the ear canal. The infection can start after swimming in dirty water or in pools treated with insufficient chlorine or after having too much water in the ear for any reason. Inflammation (irritation, swelling) caused by an allergy to hair spray can also cause otitis externa, as can regular use of earphones, which can trap moisture in the ear canal. Sometimes injury to the ear canal, as from cleaning the ear too hard with a bobby pin, cotton swab, or other object, will cause the disorder. Such cleaning can push earwax and dirt back toward the eardrum. This material can trap water and lead to infection.

### **What Are the Symptoms of Otitis Externa?**

Symptoms include ear pain that gets worse when pulling on the earlobe or outer ear or pushing on the little bump (tragus) in front of the ear, itching in the ear, slight fever (sometimes), pus coming from the ear, temporary loss of hearing in the ear, and sometimes a small painful lump or boil in the ear canal. These boils may cause severe pain. If they burst, a small amount of blood or pus may leak from the ear.

### **How Is Otitis Externa Diagnosed?**

The health care provider will examine the ear and in cases of severe or recurrent infection may take a sample of the fluid from inside the ear for study. The health care provider may also suggest seeing an otolaryngologist, a doctor who specializes in diseases of the ears, nose, and throat.

### **How Is Otitis Externa Treated?**

Treatment involves medicine as pills, eardrops, cream, or ointment for the infection. Over-the-counter medicine, such as aspirin or acetaminophen, and warm compresses may help with minor pain.

The ear canal shouldn't get wet for 7 to 10 days after all symptoms go away.

### **DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Otitis Externa**

- ✓ **DO** keep water out of your ear. Wear earplugs or a shower cap when showering.
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if pain continues in spite of treatment or if your ears feel clogged, as if they need cleaning.
- ✓ **DO** use eardrops as directed.
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if pain becomes severe and isn't helped by nonprescription drugs.
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you get a high temperature after treatment starts.
- ⊗ **DON'T** clean your ears with any object or chemical.
- ⊗ **DON'T** leave earplugs in too long.
- ⊗ **DON'T** use hairspray or hair dye near your ears.

⊗ **DON'T** go swimming or get any water in your ear for 7 to 10 days after symptoms go away.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the following sources:

- American Academy of Otolaryngology: Tel: (703) 836-4444; Website: <http://www.entnet.org>
- American Academy of Pediatrics: Tel: (847) 434-4000; Website: <http://www.aap.org>

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