

Outer Ear Infection (Swimmer's Ear)

Outer ear infection is an infection of the ear canal, outside the eardrum. This condition is often called “swimmer’s ear,” although it isn’t always related to swimming. Outer ear infections can cause a severe earache. The problem usually clears up quickly with antibiotic eardrops.

What is an outer ear infection?

An outer ear infection is an infection of the skin inside the ear canal with bacteria. Especially in children, this infection commonly occurs when the inside of the ear canal stays wet for a period of time, such as after swimming. That’s why it’s sometimes called “swimmer’s ear”; the medical term is otitis externa. Infection may also result from other causes, such as foreign bodies stuck in the ear. This is not an “inner ear infection” (acute otitis media) which occurs behind the eardrum and is usually accompanied by an upper respiratory infection (a cold).

Outer ear infection can cause a severe earache. Antibiotic eardrops, which are sometimes used to soak a “wick” that is placed in the ear, are an effective treatment.

What does it look like?

- Ear pain, which may be severe.
- The pain is usually worse when you touch or pull on your child’s ear.
- Itching in the ear; this may occur before ear pain and/or while the infection is clearing up.
- Swelling and redness of the ear canal.
- Soft, white ear wax or drainage from the ear.
- Lymph glands in the head and neck may be swollen.
- In severe cases, the outer ear may be red and swollen.
- Rarely, inability to move part of the face, dizziness, or hearing loss. These may be signs of a more serious infection—call our office immediately.

What are some possible complications of outer ear infection?

- The infection usually clears up promptly with antibiotic treatment.

- There is a small risk of a more serious infection spreading outside the ear canal. This occurs mainly in children with immune system problems (immune deficiency).

What puts your child at risk of outer ear infection?

- Swimming in lakes, ponds, or swimming pools.
- Anything that causes too much moisture in the ear canal (for example, headphones or hearing aids).
- Being too vigorous about removing earwax.
- Trauma or scratching of the ear canal. Young children may place their fingers or foreign bodies in the ear.
- Previous outer ear infections.

Can outer ear infections be prevented?

- If your child gets a lot of these kinds of ear infections, special ear drops recommended by your doctor placed in both ears immediately may help.
- Avoid sticking anything in your child’s ear (including Q-Tips).

How are outer ear infections treated?

- Antibiotic eardrops are an effective treatment for outer ear infections. The drops are placed in the ear a few times per day, usually for 7 to 10 days.
- If the ear canal is badly swollen, it may need to be cleaned out before treatment. The doctor may place a small piece of cotton-like material, called a wick, into your child’s ear. Apply antibiotic eardrops to the cotton three times per day, as instructed by the doctor. The swelling should be better after 2 or 3 days, allowing the wick to be removed. Then continue using antibiotic eardrops.
- Keep the ear dry. Your child will have to stop swimming for a while. Keep the ear from getting wet while your child is bathing in the shower or tub.
- Give analgesics (acetaminophen or ibuprofen) if necessary to relieve pain. Pain and swelling should decrease within a few days of starting antibiotic drops.
- Oral antibiotics are rarely needed.

- Occasionally, the ear canal may become infected with a fungus. In this case, other medications will be prescribed.

 **When should I call your office?**

Call our office if:

- Ear pain and swelling aren't getting better after 2 or 3 days of treatment or if they get worse.

- The outer ear is very swollen and red.
- Your child develops an inability to move part of the face, dizziness, or hearing loss. These may be signs of a more serious infection. 