What Is Swimmer's Ear?

Swimmer's Ear

Swimmer's ear is an infection of the ear canal. The ear canal connects the eardrum to the outer ear. Swimmer's ear is usually caused by bacteria but may also be from a fungus. Nearly 1 in 10 people will get swimmer's ear in their lifetime.[1]

How Does This Happen?

Swimmer's ear is common in children but may occur at any age. Swimmers are at highest risk, but anyone can be affected. For example, people who wear hearing aids or ear buds may trap moisture in the ear canal from sweating or showering. When the ear does not dry completely, bacteria and fungi grow more easily. This causes infection and irritation of the ear canal. Cleaning, scratching, or putting items in the ear (like Q-tips) can also cause infection. Unlike other ear infections, the space behind the eardrum is usually not involved.

What Are the Symptoms?

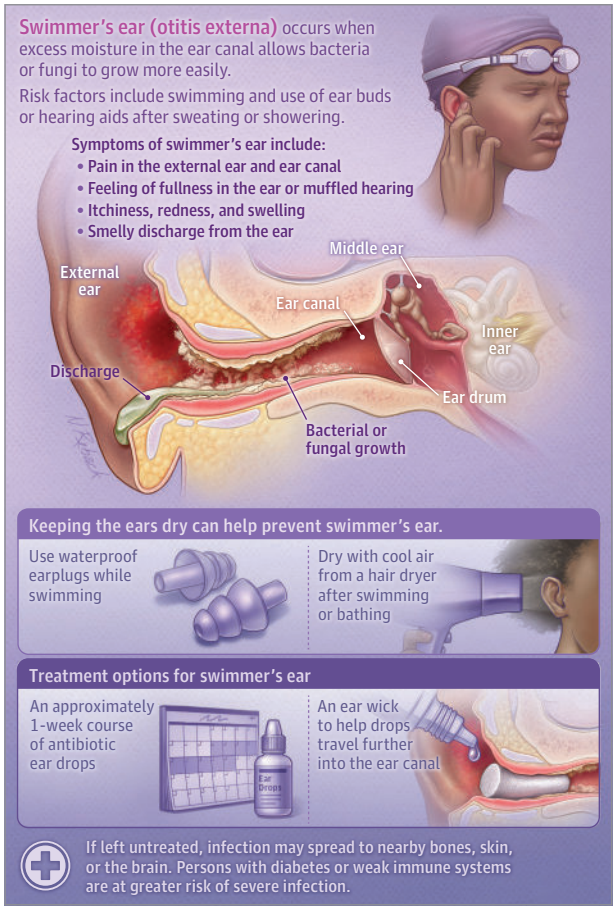
Ear pain is very common. A feeling of fullness in the ear or muffled hearing are also common. There may be smelly drainage from the ear, especially on the pillow after sleeping. Many people may experience itchiness, redness, or swelling. Fever, chills, or symptoms not involving the ear are rare.

Who Needs Treatment?

If the symptoms of swimmer's ear are present, a clinician should be seen. The main treatment is antibiotic ear drops for about a week. Antibiotics by mouth are usually not needed. This will help fight the bacteria and control the infection. The ear drops may include a steroid to decrease swelling and pain. Sometimes repeat infections happen. Completing the entire treatment is important. If the infection causes a lot of swelling, sometimes an ear, nose, and throat (ENT) specialist needs to put something in the ear canal to keep it open and allow the antibiotic drops to reach the infection. This is called an ear wick. An ENT specialist may also need to clean the ear by using instruments or suction. Keeping the ears dry, avoiding putting items in the ear, and cleaning ear devices regularly can decrease infections. While bathing, a cotton ball with Vaseline can be used to prevent water from entering the ear. After swimming or bathing, a hair dryer on cool can be used to gently dry the ear. Over-the-counter ear cleaning devices, candling, or other home remedies should be avoided.

What If It Does Not Improve?

Symptoms should improve within a few days after treatment starts. Most patients will be fully healed within 7 to 10 days. If not, this may be a sign that it is more serious, and an ENT specialist should be seen.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

UpToDate
https://www.uptodate.com/contents/external-otitis-including-swimmers-ear-beyond-the-basics

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
https://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/swimming/swimmers/rwi/ear-infections.html

When left untreated, there is a risk of the infection spreading to nearby bones or skin. This is especially important in older people with diabetes or weak immune systems. Long-term infections can result in decreased hearing and scarring.

Authors: James J. Pierre, BA; Anthony M. Tolisano, MD

Published Online: June 1, 2023. doi:10.1001/jamaoto.2023.0997

Author Affiliations: F. Edward Hebert School of Medicine, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, Bethesda, Maryland (Pierre); Department of Surgery, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, Bethesda, Maryland (Tolisano); Department of Otolaryngology, Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Bethesda, Maryland (Tolisano).

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: None reported.

Section Editor: Samantha Anne, MD, MS.

1. Rosenfeld RM, Schwartz SR, Cannon CR, et al. Clinical practice guideline: acute otitis externa. *Otolaryngol Head Neck Surg*. 2014;150(1)(suppl):S1-S24. doi:10.1177/0194599813514365