

Ask *the* Expert

Preventing swimmer's ear this summer.

Trips to the swimming pool, lake or river are some of the most common summer activities for families. If the proper precautions are not taken, people can experience otitis externa, also known as swimmer's ear.

This is an infection of the outer ear canal, which runs from your eardrum to the outside of your head. It occurs when the natural defenses of your outer ear canal have been weakened by excess moisture, scratches/abrasions, and/or sensitivity reactions caused by an allergy, causing water to become trapped in the ear canal.

Swimmer's ear can occur at any age and is painful and uncomfortable.

There are over 2 million health care visits in the United States every year due to swimmer's ear.

Luckily you can prevent this by following a few easy steps:

1. Keep your ears as dry as you can. Purchase ear plugs, swim molds, or a swimming cap to keep water out of your ears.
2. Don't put any other objects in your ear canal, including your fingers or cotton swabs.
3. When you're done swimming, make sure your ears are dried thoroughly. Towel dry them and tilt your head each direction to let water leave the ear canal. If you still have water in your ears, use a hair dryer on the lowest heat and speed. Hold it away from your ear.
4. Don't try to remove ear wax. Many people don't realize that ear wax actually helps protect your ear canal from getting infected. If you think your ear canal is blocked, speak with your doctor to determine the best course of action.

5. Recognize the symptoms of swimmer's ear in order to treat as early as possible. Beginning stages of swimmer's ear include symptoms such as itching in the ear canal, slight redness, mild discomfort (can be made worse by pull or pushing on ear), and/or slight drainage of clear fluid.

As the infection lingers, symptoms may heighten causing increased levels of pain, itching, redness, and drainage. The increased symptoms may also cause a feeling of fullness in your ear and/or partially blocked canals, as well as decreased hearing (may sound muffled).

If the infection is not treated, it will continue to worsen causing complete blockage, swelling, pain that radiates into the face and neck, and even fever.

If you experience severe pain and fever, please report to the emergency room for

immediate attention. Otherwise, you can contact your family medicine doctor or ENT specialist at the onset of even mild symptoms.

6. If you're thinking about using ear drops, speak to your doctor to see what the best option is for your needs. If you are experiencing drainage or have itchy, flaky, swollen, or painful ears, call your health care provider. Prompt treatment of swimmer's ear can help to prevent complications and/or more serious infections.

If you've recently had an ear infection or have undergone ear surgery, don't go swimming without clearing it with your doctor first. Otherwise, keep these recommendations in mind to make your summertime pool plans as painless and enjoyable as possible and don't forget to apply sunscreen!

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