



SWIMMER'S EAR (OTITIS EXTERNA)

What is swimmer's ear?

Swimmer's ear is an infection of the skin lining the ear canal. This problem is most common among swimmers or children that spend a lot of time in water. Symptoms include:

- Itchy and painful ear canals
- Pain when the ear is moved up and down
- Pain when the tab overlying the ear canal is pushed in
- Ear feels plugged up
- Clear to yellowish discharge

What is the cause?

When your child's ears have been in the water for long periods of time, water gets trapped in the ear canal, causing the lining to become damp, swollen, and prone to infection.

Children are more likely to get swimmer's ear from swimming in lake water compared to swimming pools or the ocean. Narrow ear canals also increase the risk.

Suspect a middle ear infection instead if your child also has a cold, fever, and no increased pain with pushing on the ear tab.

How can I take care of my child?

- Antibiotic-steroid eardrops for severe swimmer's ear (these require a prescription)
Run 4 drops down the side of the ear canal's opening. Do this twice a day. Move the earlobe back and forth to help the ear drops pass down. Continue using the ear drops for 7 days, or until all the symptoms are cleared up for 48 hours.
- White vinegar drops
For mild swimmer's ear, use half-strength white vinegar ear drops. Fill the ear canal with white vinegar diluted with an equal amount of water. After 10 minutes, remove it by turning the head to the side. Do this twice daily until the symptoms are gone.
- Pain relief
Use acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin) as needed.
- Swimming
Generally, your child should not swim until the symptoms are gone. Continued swimming may cause a slower recovery, but won't cause any serious problems.

How can I prevent swimmer's ear?

First, limit how many hours a day your child spends in the water. The key to prevention is keeping the ear canals dry when your child is not swimming. After swimming, get all water out of the ear canals by turning the head side to side and pulling the earlobe in different directions to help the water run out. Dry the opening to the ear canal carefully.

If recurrences are a big problem, rinse your child's ear canals with rubbing alcohol each time he finishes swimming or bathing to help it dry and kill germs. Alternatively, place a few drops of the half-strength white vinegar mix in the ear canal after swimming or bathing.

When should I call my child's healthcare provider?

Call IMMEDIATELY if:

- The ear pain becomes severe
- Your child starts acting very sick

Call during office hours if:

- The ear symptoms are not cleared up in 7 days.
- You have other concerns or questions