

## What is otitis externa?

Otitis externa (swimmer's ear) is an inflammation of the ear canal skin. It can be triggered by a number of factors (see possible causes below) that can upset the skin lining the ear canal and cause an infection (bacterial or fungal).

## What does otitis externa feel like?

Your ear might feel painful and itchy. Your hearing could also be affected and in some cases, you might experience noises or discharge from your ears.

## Possible causes of the condition

- Use of sharp objects or cotton buds to clean the ear canal.
- Swimming.
- Excessive wearing of ill-fitting earplugs.
- Chronic discharge from a ruptured ear drum.
- Exposure to irritants eg hairsprays or dyes.
- Diabetes.

## How is otitis externa treated?

Your doctor will look in your ear canal and clear any wax or discharge in order to check the ear drum. If there are signs of an infection, you may be prescribed ear drops. These drops help fight any infection and reduce any swelling of the ear canal. Sometimes, the ear canal may be too swollen for drops to be applied and your doctor may place a temporary dressing in the ear canal to help the drops work. Medicines containing paracetamol or anti-inflammatory medications may sometimes be needed to help alleviate associated earache.

You may need to be seen again until the doctor is satisfied that the condition has resolved.



## How can I prevent otitis externa?

The best way to prevent otitis externa is to keep the ear canal's natural defences against infection working well. Follow these tips:

- Never put anything in the ear canal (cotton swabs, paper clips, liquids or sprays or even your finger). This can damage or irritate the skin.
- If your ear is itchy do not scratch inside the ear canal. Olive oil drops or products recommended by your doctor may help alleviate the itchiness.
- Leave ear wax alone. If you think your hearing is reduced due to ear wax, see your doctor to be sure there is no other cause.
- Help the water run out of your ears by turning your head to each side and pulling the earlobe in different directions. A hair dryer set on the lowest heat and speed can also help to dry ears. Be sure to hold it several inches from your ear.
- If you are prone to recurrent episodes of otitis externa, keeping water out of the ear may help to reduce the frequency of infections. When you swim or surf, use ear plugs to keep water out of your ears. However, avoid ear plugs that fit into the ear canal. Ear plugs which fit in the concha (the hollow bowl of the outer ear) are preferred. An alternative is to use a cotton wool ball (not bud) with Vaseline rubbed in for showering or ear putty for swimming.

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