

Swimmer's Ear

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Summer is the time of year for enjoying the wonderful outdoors, including frequent visits to the pool or nearest beach. Most of us have experienced "swimmer's ear" at some point, but what exactly is this painful condition and how can we prevent it from spoiling our summer fun?

Acute otitis externa (AOE) is the technical name for an infection or inflammation of the lining of the ear canal. The condition gets the name "swimmer's ear" because it is more likely to occur among swimmers or surfers, especially in warm, humid climates. The condition usually develops after water gets trapped in the ear canal, then a bacterial or fungal infection sets in. Factors that may increase the risk of developing swimmer's ear include: contact with excessive bacteria in hot tubs or polluted water, excessive cleaning of the ear canal with cotton swabs or other foreign objects, a cut in the skin of the ear canal, and other skin conditions affecting the ear canal such as eczema or seborrhea.

Although swimmer's ear is usually considered a mild illness, its impact is not. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that the condition results in an estimated 2.4 million health care visits costing over half a billion dollars in direct health care costs each year. The most common symptoms of swimmer's ear include pain (often severe) and itching inside the ear canal. Sufferers may also experience redness/swelling, drainage from the ear, fever, a feeling that the ear is blocked, or even hearing loss. If left untreated, it may lead to recurring ear infections, hearing loss, and even more serious complications. Immediate treatment by a medical professional is recommended to reduce pain and prevent the spread of infection.

Tips for prevention include:

- Use well-fitted earplugs when swimming
- Do not swim in polluted water
- Towel off or use a hair dryer to dry your ears
- Tilt your head to each side to allow water to escape the ear canal
- Do not use cotton swabs or other objects to remove earwax; this usually just packs earwax and dirt deeper in the ear canal (a thin layer of earwax actually helps protect your ear canal from infection)
- Check with your doctor on a regular basis if you have frequent cases of swimmer's ear or any other ear problems such as itchy, flaky or scaly ears, or excessive earwax that blocks your ear canal

To learn more:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [Swimming & Ear Infections](#)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [Facts about "Swimmer's ear"](#)

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2011). [Estimated burden of acute otitis externa - United States, 2003-2007](#). MMWR, Vol. 60 (19), 2011.

(photo source: cdc.gov)