



Swimmers Ready?

Lynda Steyn, BPharm
Amayeza Information Services

Sometimes it is called “swimmer’s ear” and sometimes “otitis externa”, but both of these terms refer to the same thing – an infection in the outer ear. More specifically, it is an inflammation in the tube between the eardrum and the outer ear. This painful inflammation of the ear is often due to an infection caused by bacteria, but sometimes the cause may be due to a fungal or yeast infection.

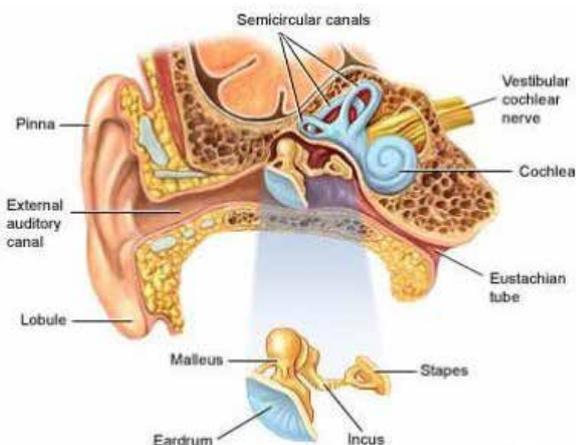


Figure 1. The human ear

Available from: http://www.hf.faa.gov/webtraining/NonVisDisplays/n05_Auditory2.htm

What causes swimmer’s ear?

The ear canals are lined with a protective layer of wax (cerumen). This sticky wax protects our ears by ridding the ear of water and trapping fine dirt particles in the ear canal. It also prevents the growth of bacteria and fungi by making the ear canal more acidic.

If this protective barrier is broken down, the resulting inflammation causes a chain of events, starting with itchy ears, which then leads to scratching and further damage to the ear. The amount and quality of the wax changes, increasing the alkalinity and the moisture in the ear canal, creating the perfect environment for organisms to grow.

Who is more likely to develop swimmer’s ear?

- Swimmers (hence the name “swimmer’s ear”) frequently have their ears exposed to water. Water is more likely to become trapped in the ear canal and this creates a moist environment for bacteria to grow. Trapped water irritates the ears, making them itchy, which then leads to scratching and results in the inflammation of the ear canal. This would also occur, for example, when showering or bathing, where ears are exposed to water and irritants, such as shampoo or soap.
- Damaging the ear canal lining by scratching, using ear buds, earphones, earplugs or hearing aids, irritates the outer ear leading to inflammation and infection.

People suffering from allergic skin conditions, as well as eczema and psoriasis also tend to suffer regularly from outer ear infections. Living in hot, humid conditions is more likely to cause sweating, which also provides a breeding ground for bacteria.

Symptoms of swimmer’s ear may include:

- Ear pain (ear may also be sore if touched, or pulled gently)
- Itching of ear (pruritus)
- Pus, or fluid like discharge from ear
- Feeling as if “something is in the ear”
- Hearing loss or difficulty in hearing

Tips for preventing swimmer’s ear:

- **Keep ears as dry as possible.**

After swimming, tilt your head and hop on one leg to drain the water out of the ears. A few drops of a 2% acetic acid solution can also help dry the ear out after swimming. Use a hairdryer set on low and hold it about 30 cm away from

the head to help dry ears. A properly fitted swimming cap, or well-fitting ear-plugs when swimming and wearing a shower cap when showering, can also prevent water (and shampoo) from getting in the ears. A small piece of cotton wool with a bit of Vaseline® on it can also help prevent water from entering the ears when showering.

- **Use caution when cleaning ears.**

The outside of the ear may be cleaned by using a washcloth.

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It is not recommended to clean ears by inserting anything inside them, whether these are ear-buds, keys or fingers.

Treatment

If swimmer's ear is suspected, the patient will need to be referred to a doctor in order for the ear to be examined through an otoscope to confirm the diagnosis.

Swimmer's ear may resolve spontaneously, but in some instances ear drops containing an antibiotic, (sometimes combined with a steroid for the inflammation), may be prescribed. Swimmer's ear responds very well to ear drops, as the infection is usually limited to the external ear.

Listen up! Did you know....

- Ears are self-cleaning. Removing wax from the ear canal removes the ear's protective barrier, exposing the ear to infection.
- Using ear buds to clean your ears not only damages the ears, but pushes the ear wax further into the ear canal where it may become trapped.
- People with narrow ear canals (e.g. children), or people who have hairy ear canals, are more likely to get swimmer's ear.
- Swimming in dirty water, as opposed to water treated with chlorine, is more likely to cause ear infections due to the higher bacterial content of the water.
- Rarely, the bacteria in the ear canal can infect the bones inside the ear, causing malignant external otitis. This very serious complication of swimmer's ear needs immediate treatment by a doctor, as it may be life-threatening. Elderly diabetics, people with HIV and immunocompromised children are at a higher risk of developing this infection.

References available on request.

