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Otitis Externa

What is Otitis Externa?

Otitis externa (OE) is a type of ear infection. It is an infection of the ear canal. Because the canal is dark and warm, it can easily get infected with bacteria (germs) and fungus. OE is different from the kind of infection you get in the middle part of your ear. That kind of infection is called otitis media.

What Causes OE?

- Several things can make OE more likely including the following:
- If you swim or shower a lot, too much water can get into your ears. Water removes the protective ear wax. Then it's easier for germs and fungus to grow.
- Cleaning your ears can remove the protective wax layer and lead to infection.
- If you injure the skin in the ear canal by putting your finger or some object in your ear, an infection can develop in the canal.
- Skin conditions such as psoriasis that occur in other parts of the body can also occur in the ear canal and cause OE.

What Does OE Feel Like?

Your ear might itch. It might hurt very badly. The pain might get worse when your ear moves while you're chewing. The ear might feel plugged up. You might not be able to hear as well. Your ears might drain. See your doctor if any of these things happen. None of these things should last if you get treated.

How is OE Treated?

Your doctor will look in your ear canal and remove any drainage or pus. Your doctor will check your eardrum to make sure there's no other infection. Most OE infections can be treated with ear drops, but sometimes pills are needed.

How Should I Use Ear Drops?

Your doctor will tell you how long and how often to use your ear drops. Warm the bottle in your hands before putting the drops in your ear. Using warm ear drops may keep you from getting dizzy when the drops go in. Moving the earlobe back and forth after putting the drops in can help the medicine go deep into the ear canal.

What Else Can I Do?

Follow your doctor's directions carefully and use all of your medicines. OE can be hard to treat. Here are some things that will help you get better:

- **Keep your ear as dry as possible for 7 to 10 days.** Take baths instead of showers. Try to keep water out of your ears when you wash your hair. Don't swim or play other water sports. If you're on a swim team, ask your doctor before you return to swimming.
- **Don't put anything except the prescribed medicine in your ears.** Scratching and rubbing will only make OE worse.

Symptoms are usually much better in 3 days. They should be completely gone in 10 days. If you're not better by then, call your doctor.

How Can I Prevent OE?

The best way to prevent OE is to keep the ear canal's natural defenses 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 ears itch a lot, see your doctor.
- **Leave ear wax alone.** If you think your ear wax affects your hearing, see your doctor to be sure there's no other cause.
- **Keep your ears as dry as possible.** Use a towel to dry your ears well after swimming or showering. 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 swim or surf, use a bathing cap or wet suit hood to keep water out of your ears.
- **Preventative ear drops:** Commercial preparations such as Swim Ear® are available without prescription. As they have an alcohol base they can lead to itching. A simpler measure is to use a solution of white vinegar and water, 50/50, as an ear drop after shower or swimming.
- **Don't use earplugs.** They can irritate the ear canal. If you must use them, use a silicone putty to fill the bowl of the outer ear, and don't push anything into the ear canal.