



PEDIATRIC HEALTHCARE UNLIMITED

Swimmer's Ear (Otitis Externa)

DEFINITION

Diagnostic Findings

- Itchy and painful ear canals
- Currently engaged in swimming
- Pain when the earlobe is moved up and down
- Pain when the tab of the earlobe overlying the ear canal is pushed in
- A feeling that the ear is plugged up
- Slight, clear discharge initially; without treatment, it becomes yellowish

Cause

Swimmer's ear is an infection of the skin lining the ear canal. When water gets trapped in the ear canal the lining becomes swollen and prone to infection. Ear canals were meant to be dry. Children are more likely to get swimmer's ear from swimming pools than from lakes. The chlorine in pools kills all the good bacteria in the ear canal, and harmful bacteria tend to take over.

Expected Course

With treatment, symptoms should be better in 3 days.

HOME TREATMENT

Antibiotic Ear Drops are prescribed to treat swimmer's ear.

Run the ear drops down the side of the ear, opening and moving the ear, so that air isn't trapped under them.

Continue the ear drops until all the symptoms are cleared up for 48 hours. Use acetaminophen or ibuprofen for pain relief.

Generally, your child should not swim until the symptoms are gone. If he is on a swim team, he may continue but should use the ear drops as a rinse after each session.

Prevention. 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 to the 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 for 1 minute each time he finishes swimming or bathing.

Common Mistakes. Don't use earplugs of any kind for prevention or treatment. They tend to jam ear wax back into the ear canal. Also, they don't keep all the water out of the ear canals. Cotton swabs also shouldn't be inserted in ear canals. Wax buildup traps water behind it and increases the risk of swimmer's ear. A rubbing alcohol/vinegar mixture is helpful for preventing swimmer's ear but not for treating it because it would sting too much.

CALL OUR OFFICE

During regular hours if

- The symptoms are not cleared up in 3 days.
- The pain becomes worse after 24 hours of treatment.
- A fever (over 100° F [37.8° C]) occurs.
- The ear becomes severely painful.
- The lymph node behind the earlobe becomes swollen and tender.
- You have other concerns or questions.