

SWIMMER'S EAR

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It's summertime – Time for fun in the sun and time for swimming. It's fun until you get an earache from swimming. Just about everyone who swims in Florida has either had an earache from swimming or knows someone who has had one.

What is Swimmer's Ear?

This is a painful infection of the delicate skin of the ear canal that connects the outer portion of the ear to the eardrum. The ear canal is inflamed and tender. Pressure applied to the canal by moving the outer ear results in worsening pain. Since the ear canal lies just behind the jaw joint, movement of the jaw may cause even more pain. The infection often produces pus, causing the ear to drain. Unlike middle ear infections, there is usually no fever and there is no association with head colds or sinus infections.

What causes Swimmer's Ear?

Most often, swimming. When water gets into the ear canal it often gets trapped. This leaves a moist, dark, warm place for bacteria or fungus to multiply. There are also other causes of the same type of infection, referred to by physicians as Otitis Externa. Trauma to the canal breaks down the normal body defenses against infection, and allows bacteria to invade the skin. Scratching the ear canals with Q-tips, bobby pins, paper clips or other objects often results in the same type of infection as swimming. Conditions which make the ear canals itch also may lead to Otitis Externa, because they may result in scratching the ear.

How is it treated?

Generally the infection responds well to eardrops placed in the ear canal. The drops may contain antibiotics to kill bacteria, or they may just contain acid chemicals that make it impossible for the bacteria to live. Usually only about 4 drops are needed to coat the ear canal. Typically, they are used about 4 times a day for about 10 days. Sometimes it is necessary for the physician to remove pus and other debris from the ear canal. This allows the drops to reach the surface of the infected skin, and not be blocked from getting where they need to reach. Sometimes the infection causes so much swelling in the ear canal that the physician must insert a packing in the ear canal. This acts like a "wick" of a candle and allows the drops to travel down the canal to the infected skin they need to reach. Pain medication is usually prescribed to help until the eardrops have had time to take effect.

Can it be prevented?

Usually it can, for people with normal eardrums, by following the following suggestions:

- After swimming put a few acid-alcohol drops in each ear. You can use either commercially prepared drops available at your drugstore, or you can much less expensively prepare a solution by mixing equal quantities of rubbing alcohol with white vinegar.
- Don't scratch your ears or insert any objects into your ears. Grandma was right when she advised you to never put anything in your ear smaller than your elbow!
- If you have chronic itching in your ears, consult a physician to determine the cause. Generally a medication can be prescribed to eliminate or control the itching.