

## UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

## OTITIS EXTERNA

**WHAT IS IT?**

Otitis externa is a condition that occurs when the ear canal becomes inflamed or irritated. Causes can include infections, allergies, or skin problems. Acute bacterial infection is the most common cause of otitis externa. Fungal infections may also occur.

**WHAT ARE COMMON RISK FACTORS?**

The following activities and conditions can increase the risk of developing otitis externa:

- Removing ear wax when cleaning the ear canal. Ear wax protects the ears from water, infection, and injury. It also creates an acidic environment which reduces the growth of bacteria and fungus. Excessive cleaning can also scratch or injure the skin, further increasing the risk of infection.
- Swimming on a regular basis. Otitis externa is commonly known as “Swimmer’s Ear” because frequent exposure to water can remove ear wax and soften skin in the ear canal, making it more prone to infection.
- Frequent use of ear plugs, ear buds, hearing aids, etc., which can injure the skin in the ear canal.
- Having eczema, psoriasis, or another skin condition that affects the ear canal.
- Having skin allergies or irritation from jewelry, shampoo, or hair dyes.

**WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?**

The most common symptoms include:

- Pain in the outer ear, especially when the ear is pulled or moved.
- Fluid or pus draining from the ear.
- Itchiness in the ear.
- Decreased hearing.

**HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?**

Diagnosis is based on your symptoms and physical exam findings. Your medical provider will examine the inside and outside of the ear. A culture of the ear canal, used to identify the specific cause of infection, may be ordered in rare cases that are not responding to treatment.

**WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?**

Treatment focuses on relieving pain and eliminating infection.

❖ **Medicated ear drops** are often prescribed to eradicate infection and reduce swelling. Ear drops may contain an acidifying agent, a corticosteroid, and/or an antibiotic. The severity of your condition will determine the type of ear drops prescribed.

- To apply ear drops correctly:
  - Lie on your side, or tilt your head towards the opposite shoulder.
  - Tug the upper corner of your outer ear up, and fill the entire ear canal with drops (typically 4-6 drops for an adult ear canal). Move the earlobe back and forth after putting the drops in to help the medicine go deep into the ear canal.
  - Lie on your side for 5 minutes, or place a cotton ball in the ear canal for 20 minutes.
  - Follow your prescription instructions for repeating this procedure. Most ear drops are applied 3-4 times daily.
- Finish the entire treatment course, even if you feel better.
  - A typical treatment course is 7 days, but may be as long as 14 days.
  - Most patients notice improvement within 36-48 hours of starting treatment and experience resolution of symptoms by day 6.

### **WHAT IS THE TREATMENT? (continued)**

- ❖ **Pain medications**, such as ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin) or acetaminophen (Tylenol), can reduce pain. Take ibuprofen with food to avoid an upset stomach. In severe cases, stronger pain medications may be prescribed by your medical provider.
- ❖ **Keep your ears dry.** During treatment, avoid getting the inside of your ears wet:
  - When showering, place a cotton ball coated with petroleum jelly in the ear.
  - Do not swim for 7 to 10 days after starting treatment.
  - Avoid wearing in-ear headphones and ear plugs until symptoms resolve. These devices should be disinfected prior to re-use.
- ❖ **Schedule a follow-up appointment** in 1-2 weeks.
  - If symptoms are mild, follow-up is only needed if symptoms persist beyond 1 week.
  - If symptoms are severe, follow-up may be recommended before 1 week.
  - If symptoms are not improving after 48 hours of treatment, notify your healthcare provider.
- ❖ **A referral to an Ear, Nose, & Throat (ENT) specialist** for further evaluation and treatment may be required if the infection is severe or your eardrum is ruptured.

### **HOW DO I PREVENT IT?**

- ❖ **Leave your ear wax alone** unless it is causing pain or problems hearing. The ear is self-cleaning, and having some ear wax is normal and protective.
  - Avoid using fingers, Q-tips, towels, hair pins, and other objects to clean the inside of the ears.
  - If you think you have an excessive amount of ear wax, talk to your healthcare provider and/or refer to our [“Ear Wax” handout](#) to learn about safe ways to clean your ears.
- ❖ **If you swim frequently**, experts recommend the following tips:
  - Dry your ears well after swimming.
    - Help the water run out of your ears by turning your head to each side and pulling the earlobe in different directions.
    - Use a soft towel to dry your outer ears.
    - You can also blow dry your ears on a low setting, holding the dryer 12 inches away.
  - Consider using ear drops containing alcohol or acetic acid after swimming to prevent ear infections.
    - These drops are available at most pharmacies without a prescription.
    - You can also make your own ear drops: Mix 1 part white vinegar with 1 part rubbing alcohol. Pour 1 teaspoon (5 milliliters) of the solution into each ear and let it drain back out.
    - Do not use these drops if you have ear tubes, a punctured ear drum, swimmer’s ear or ear damage.
  - Wear ear plugs made for swimming.
- ❖ **If you wear hearing aids**, remove them nightly and clean them regularly.

**RECOMMENDED WEBSITES:** [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov), [www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org)