

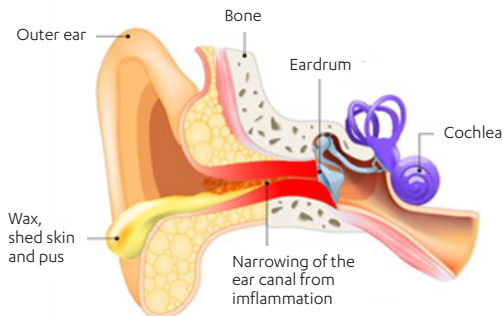
Otitis externa (swimmer's ear)

What is otitis externa?

Otitis externa, also known as swimmer's ear, is an inflammation of the outer ear. The skin that lines the outer ear canal becomes red and swollen due to infection by bacteria or fungus. This infection is very common and affects all age groups.

The outer ear canal is a short tunnel that runs from the ear hole to the eardrum inside the ear. It is lined with normal skin that contains hairs and glands that produce wax (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Otitis externa



Why does this happen?

Water may enter the outer ear canal and not drain out, such as when you go swimming or wash your hair. When the ear canal is wet for a long period of time, the skin becomes soft and 'soggy'. This makes it an ideal environment for bacteria or fungi, which are normally present on the skin, to grow and cause an infection.

Other possible causes of infection include:

- Cleaning inside the ear canal with cotton buds, fingertips and other objects
- Chemicals such as hairsprays, shampoos and hair dyes that may irritate and break the fragile skin, allowing bacteria and fungi to enter
- Skin conditions such as eczema or dermatitis where the skin is flaky or broken and does not act as a protective barrier
- Narrow ear canals
- Middle ear infections
- Diabetes

What are the symptoms?

- Pain and tenderness in the ear canal
- The outer ear may be sensitive and sore, even to light touch or movement
- Itchiness or fullness in the ear
- Foul-smelling yellow or green pus in the ear canal
- A high temperature (fever)
- Reduced hearing
- Redness of the ear or nearby skin

Treatment

Treatment is aimed at cleaning the canal, fighting the infection, reducing ear canal swelling and keeping it dry.

In mild cases a doctor may clean the outer ear canal using a light suction device or a probe and then prescribe ear drops for you to use at home. These drops typically contain antibiotics, corticosteroids or a combination of these medicines.

If the infection is severe, a small sponge called a wick may be inserted into the ear canal. Ear drops may be delivered to the ear canal via the wick. You will need to see your doctor to have the wick removed.

Ear drops should be used for at least seven days, even if you feel better sooner.

Rarely oral antibiotics are needed. If so, take the full course as prescribed, even if you feel better after a day or two.

Home care

- Keep the ear canal dry by using earplugs or a shower cap while bathing
- If you have pain, try simple pain medications such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. These medications are not suitable for everyone. Speak to your doctor before taking these medications if you are unsure. Follow the instructions on the product packaging.

Instructions for inserting ear drops

- If possible, get someone to put the drops in the ear canal for you
- Lie down with the affected ear up. Put enough drops in the ear to fill it up.

PATIENT INFORMATION

- Once the drops are in, stay in this position for three to five minutes. It is important to allow enough time for the drops to penetrate the ear canal.
- A gentle to-and-fro movement of the ear will sometimes help get the drops to the right place. Alternatively, press in and out on the small piece of cartilage at the front of the ear canal.
- After three to five minutes you can get up and assume normal activities. Wipe off any excess drops.
- Do not clean your ear yourself because it may damage the ear canal or even the eardrum
- If the drops do not go into your ear, see your doctor about whether you need the ear cleaned and a wick inserted
- If you have a wick inserted it may fall out on its own. This is a good sign and suggests it is getting better.
- Do not remove a wick yourself

What to expect

Most people feel better within 48-72 hours and have minimal symptoms by seven days. Sometimes the infection is ongoing or keeps coming back. This may mean that you need a different type of ear drop such as one that contains an anti-fungal medicine. Rarely, repeated infections may cause the ear canal to become narrowed by scar tissue. Narrow ear canals may also affect hearing. Return to Cabrini ED if problems are not getting better.

Follow-up

If you have had a wick inserted into your ear you will need to see your doctor as instructed to change the wick. If there are ongoing problems, your doctor may refer you to a specialist for further treatment and to prevent permanent damage.

Prevention

There are a number of steps you can take to prevent otitis externa:

- Avoid getting water into your ears. Wear earplugs or plug your ears with cotton wool coated in Vaseline when bathing and using hair products. Alternatively, rather than using ear plugs that are inserted into the ear canal, consider using moulds that fit the hollow bowl (concha) of the ear.
- Avoid swimming in dirty or polluted water
- Dry your ears well after bathing. Shake the water out or use a hair dryer. You may be advised to use ear drops, which are available at pharmacies.
- Do not poke your fingers or any other objects into your ears. The ear cleans itself naturally.

Seeking help

Cabrini Emergency Department (ED) is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor's fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on **(03) 9508 1500**
- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au