

Health Tips

from New London Hospital

Swimmer's Ear

Swimmer's Ear is a common infection during the summer months due to the increased amount of outdoor swimming. Known in the medical field as *otitis externa*, swimmer's ear is common in children and young adults, but can affect any age.

The main cause of swimmer's ear

is a bacterium that builds up inside the ear canal, which is the passageway to the eardrum. The bacterium grows when water stays in the ear canal after swimming in contaminated water. It washes away the protective layer of earwax and infects the delicate skin found in the ear canal. Swimmer's ear can also be caused by a scratch or other irritation in the ear canal that is contaminated with the bacterium. It is not common for swimmer's ear to appear after taking baths or showering.



Dr. Jennifer Judkins

Symptoms of swimmer's ear include: itching in the ear; pain in the ear (when the ear is touched, bumped, or there is head movement); temporary hearing difficulty (which is due to swelling of the ear canal); ear drainage (a yellow or yellow-green pus that may have a foul smell); redness; and inflammation.

If you or your child is experiencing any of these symptoms, seek medical attention from your primary care physician. The only way to treat swimmer's ear is through diagnosis and prescribed medications. Your doctor will make a diagnosis based on observation of the infected ear and questions about your or your child's symptoms. After diagnosis, your physician may prescribe one or more of the following: antibiotic ear drops; corticosteroids to reduce the itching and inflammation; acetic acid ear drops, and/or a pain reliever, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin).

There are a few ways to prevent you or your child from getting swimmer's ear this summer. Dry your and your child's ears after swimming. If you cannot remove the water from the ears, apply drops of alcohol-based ear product (available at your pharmacy) to dry up the water. If you or your children are constantly in a pool, check the chlorine and pH levels. Good chlorine and pH control in the water make it unlikely to spread swimmer's ear. You and your children should avoid putting objects, such as fingers and cotton swabs, in your ears. The smallest scratches to the ear canal can provide a site for infection.

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