

Your Health

by Dr. Paul Roumeliotis

Swimmer's Ear Is Common During the Summer Time

Both adults and children can develop “swimmer’s ear”, especially during the summer months. Also known as otitis externa, swimmer’s ear is commonly confused with the typical ear infections we see in children. However, these two types of conditions differ not only in their cause and symptoms, but in their treatment too.

“Otitis” means inflammation or infection of the ear and “externa” means outer or external. The term *otitis externa* refers to an infection or irritation of the outer ear canal caused by bacteria or fungi that are commonly found in lake (fresh) or ocean water.

Otitis externa tends to occur less frequently after swimming in pool water, which technically is sterile because of the chlorine. However, if the pool is not well chlorinated, swimmer’s ear can occur after swimming in pools too.

Swimmer’s ear causes the following symptoms:

- pain (especially in the ear canal)
- itchiness of the ear
- oozing of pus or liquid from the affected ear
- worsening pain when the ear is moved

One of the differences between this type of infection and *otitis media* (the typical ear infection that we hear about in children) is that otitis externa does not affect the eardrum nor the area behind it (known as the middle ear space). By examining the ear through an otoscope, a doctor can usually easily distinguish swimmer’s ear from otitis media. In swimmer’s ear, the outer ear canal is red and irritated whereas in otitis media, it is the eardrum itself that is red and infected. In contrast, this is not the case in swimmer’s ear. Because it tends to occur during the swimming season, swimmer’s ear is seen more frequently in the summer. However, otitis media tends to occur more during the winter months.

How is swimmers ear treated?

Again, the approach is not the same as for a middle ear infection or otitis media, which is treated by antibiotics taken by mouth.

For swimmer’s ear, antibiotic/anti-inflammatory drops are prescribed and placed directly into the ear. The treatment is usually for 5 to 7 days and the symptoms improve within a day or two after starting the drops. Swimmer’s ear very rarely causes any other more serious complications or problems.

Swimmer’s ear can be prevented by:

- wearing bathing caps that cover the ear canal while swimming for prolonged periods in a lake or beach
- drying out the ear canal after swimming (gently passing a hair dryer over the ear may help)
- not swimming in pools that appear dirty or that are not properly chlorinated

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