

Otitis externa

The aim of this information sheet is to answer some of the questions you may have about the ear condition otitis externa. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

What is otitis externa?

Otitis externa is a condition of the outer ear caused by inflammation of the skin in the ear canal (the tube between the outer ear and the eardrum). The condition is often referred to as 'swimmer's ear'.

What causes otitis externa?

It can occur for no apparent reason. However, there are several likely causes.

- Getting water, shampoo or soap into the ear canal can irritate the skin.
- Damage to the skin in the ear canal (caused by cotton buds, scratching or poking) causes inflammation and infection.
- Water can get into the ear canal while you are swimming (hence the term swimmer's ear). The stagnant water triggers an infection.
- Hot humid weather makes inflammation of the ear canal more likely to develop.
- Skin problems such as eczema or psoriasis can increase the chance of developing problems with the ear canal.
- An increased build-up of wax in the ear canal can start to cause irritation, or water can become trapped behind the wax, causing infection.

What are the symptoms of otitis externa?

The symptoms of otitis externa are:

- itching, pain or discomfort in the ear canal
- a watery discharge from the ear canal
- dry flaky skin around the outside of the ear and along the canal
- the ear canal starting to close up due to swelling and inflammation
- reduced hearing (in severe cases)
- discomfort in moving the jaw with chewing or speaking.

What is the treatment for otitis externa?

- You may be prescribed eardrops or spray. These usually have a combination of an antibiotic to treat any infection, and a steroid to reduce the inflammation and itching. The treatment usually lasts for seven to 10 days. You should follow the prescribed course.
- Painkillers may also be needed (for example paracetamol or ibuprofen), which you can buy over the counter. Sometimes stronger painkillers are needed and you may need a prescription from your doctor or nurse. Always follow the instructions on the packet.
- You may need your ear cleaned out by a healthcare professional. They use cotton wool attached to a special instrument, and look into your ear with a light. They then clean your ear using gentle suction under a microscope, or irrigation with water.
- A gauze (or wick) soaked in eardrops or ointment may be gently pushed into the ear canal to help get the medication to the whole ear canal if it is very swollen. This should only be done by a healthcare professional. This is usually removed within 48 hours and then ear drops or spray continued for the prescribed course.
- If the condition does not improve, your healthcare professional may take a swab to ensure that the most appropriate antibiotics are used to treat the infection.
- If there is swelling of the outer ear or if you have diabetes or any other conditions that affect your immune system (making you more prone to infection), your healthcare professional may prescribe antibiotic tablets.

What happens if I do not get treatment?

The ear infection will get worse and become very painful. It will become uncomfortable to move your jaw and further complications may develop (such as the infection spreading beyond your external ear).

How can I avoid getting otitis externa?

- Avoid getting water, soap or shampoo into the ear canal when having a bath or shower. Place a piece of cotton wool about the size of a 50 pence piece, coated with white soft paraffin (which you can buy at a pharmacy), at the entrance of both ear canals. Do not push the cotton wool down into the ear canal as it may be difficult to remove.
- To clean the outside of the ear use a dry tissue or alcohol-free baby wipes around and behind the ear after showering or bathing.
- Make sure you never use cotton buds, tissues or material to soak up any moisture in your ears. Let them dry naturally.
- Do not use cotton buds, scratch or poke your ears, insert anything into your ears.
- To keep your ears dry when swimming you may consider wearing a tight-fitting swimming cap over your ears. Headbands are also available to protect the ears from water. This will also help to keep cotton wool or earplugs in place.
- If you suffer from frequent bouts of otitis externa it may be helpful to visit an audiologist (a specialist in assessing and treating ear and hearing problems) and have an impression taken of your outer ear for swimming plugs. The plugs create a seal against water entry. This service may be provided for you by the NHS. Ask your GP or practice nurse to refer you.

- If you wear a hearing aid, wash the mould daily in warm soapy water while you are having treatment. Discuss with your hearing aid provider the benefit of the mould being vented (having a hole in the mould to allow air into the ear canal when wearing the aid) or having a hypo-allergenic mould, which contains material less likely to cause a reaction with the skin.
- If you accidentally get water in your ears speak to your local pharmacist about treatments to reduce the chance of a recurring infection.
- If you suffer from itchy or dry skin in your ear canals speak to your local pharmacist or a healthcare professional about treatments available.
- If the entrance to the ear canal is dry and/or itchy, you may find it helpful to place a moisturising ointment around the bowl of the ear and at the entrance to the ear canal.
- If the otitis externa does not settle after treatment, your ear should be checked by a doctor or nurse specialising in ear, nose and throat (ENT) problems. Ask your GP to refer you.
- **Do not to use over-the-counter products if there is a chance that your eardrum may be perforated (have a hole in it).**

Useful contacts

If you are concerned about your ears see your local nurse or doctor. There is a Nurse-Led Ear Care Clinic held at St Thomas' Hospital. Ask your GP or practice nurse to refer you.

Nurse-Led Ear Care Clinic

ENT Department
2nd Floor Lambeth Wing
St Thomas' Hospital
London SE1 7EH

Paediatric Access Team t: 020 718 84690

Adult Access Team t: 020 7188 7188 ext 50456 / 50667

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust's services, please contact PALS. Ask a member of staff to direct you to the PALS office or:

t: 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas' t: 020 7188 8803 at Guy's e: pals@gstt.nhs.uk

Language support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch using the following contact details.

t: 020 7188 8815 fax: 020 7188 5953

Leaflet number: 2562/VER3

Date published: June 2015

Review date: June 2018

© 2015 Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust