

What is Swimmer's Ear?

This is a skin infection in the ear canal. It occurs because if water sits in the ear canal for long periods, the skin begins to break down. The damaged skin can then become infected with bacteria or fungus. The result is painful or itchy ears. It can often be distinguished from the more common, middle ear infection, by the fact that it hurts to pull on the ear lobe (because this stretches the painful ear canal). It does not cause fever. There is occasionally a bad odor in the ear canal, it may look swollen, or have a small amount of watery or yellow drainage coming from it.

How do you treat it?

In most cases, it can be treated with a topical antibiotic/anti-inflammatory ear drop

Can my child still swim?

In most cases it is probably better to stay out of the pool for at least a few days. When kids are on a swim team, this may not be possible. In that case, put the drops in as soon as possible after swimming, and do 1 or 2 extra doses per day. It may take longer to clear up as well.

Is swimmer's ear serious or contagious?

Swimmer's ear, if treated early, is not serious and will not affect hearing. It is also not contagious. Still, it can be quite painful. For a while, the infected ear may be very tender to the touch, or may hurt more when you chew, press on the little "tag" cartilage (tragus) in the front of your ear, or wiggle your earlobe. The ear will feel blocked and may itch or produce a milky discharge.

The swelling of the ear is what causes pain. Because the ear canal is such a small place, there is nowhere for the skin to expand when it becomes irritated. The result is feeling discomfort that can range anywhere from mild to severe.

How can I prevent swimmer's ear?

After swimming, attempt to get the water out of the ear canals by turning the child's head to the side and gently pulling on the ear lobe. Dry the opening carefully with a towel. You can also use either one of several swimmer's ear prevention drops purchased over-the-counter, or a solution you make yourself with ½ rubbing alcohol and ½ vinegar. Place a few drops in the ear canals after swimming or bathing. Do not use these drops for actual treatment of swimmer's ear, as they would sting and not clear the infection.

It is generally not a good idea to use ear plugs to keep the water out of the ears. They may push wax further back in the ear and trap water behind it. They are not very good at keeping water out anyway.

Don't push a Q-tip into the ear canal either. This also tends to push wax further back, and can irritate the ear canals.