
SELF-CARE INFORMATION ON OTITIS EXTERNA



Otitis externa is the inflammation of the external ear canal, often called "swimmer's ear" due to its association with water exposure. It is relatively common, affecting about 1 in 10 people, particularly adults aged 45 to 75.

Symptoms

- Severe ear pain
- Itching in the ear canal
- Discharge (liquid or pus)
- Temporary hearing loss
- Typically affects one ear.

When to Seek Medical Attention

Contact your GP if you experience:

- High fever
- Severe pain that doesn't improve
- Swelling around the ear

- Persistent symptoms despite treatment
- Diagnosis

When visiting a GP, you may be asked about the use of ear inserts (like hearing aids or earplugs). An otoscope may be used for examination. If you experience recurring episodes, a swab may be taken for testing to identify the underlying cause.

Causes

Most cases result from bacterial infections, but otitis externa can also be caused by:

- Irritation
- Fungal infections
- Allergies

Risk Factors

Factors that increase the likelihood of developing otitis externa include:

- Damage to ear canal skin
- Frequent water exposure (especially in dirty water)
- Use of cotton swabs or earplugs

Treatment

While some cases may resolve without treatment, your GP can prescribe ear drops that typically improve symptoms within a few days. Common types of ear drops include:

- Antibiotic ear drops (for bacterial infections)
- Corticosteroid ear drops (to reduce swelling)
- Antifungal ear drops (for fungal infections)
- A combination of above

If symptoms are severe or do not improve, a referral to a specialist may be necessary.

Home Care Tips

- Keep the affected ear dry and avoid swimming until fully healed.
- Use over-the-counter pain relief, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen.
- Apply a warm compress to the ear to alleviate pain.
- Avoid inserting objects into your ears, including cotton swabs.
- If using ear drops, tilt your head to the side and pull the outer ear up and back to ensure proper application.

Prevention

To reduce the risk of developing otitis externa:

- Avoid inserting objects into your ears.
- Use ear plugs or a swimming cap when swimming.
- Keep ears dry during showers and baths and avoid letting soap or shampoo enter the ear canal.

- Consider using acidifying ear drops or sprays before and after swimming.

Complications

While uncommon, complications can arise, including:

- Abscesses (painful, pus-filled growths)
- Narrowing of the ear canal (stenosis)
- Perforated eardrum (a tear that can cause hearing loss)
- Cellulitis (a bacterial skin infection)
- Necrotizing otitis externa (a serious infection spreading to surrounding bone)

Understanding Chronic Otitis Externa

Chronic otitis externa may occur if symptoms persist for more than three months. This condition may require ongoing management and specialized care.

Follow-Up Care

After treatment, follow up with your GP to ensure the condition has fully resolved and to check for any underlying issues.

If symptoms persist or worsen, seek medical advice promptly.

Useful contacts

- Ask your pharmacist.
- Patient UK - www.patient.co.uk
- NHS Choices, www.nhs.uk/conditions/

If you have further questions:

Complete a **triage form** via our [website](#).

Call the **practice** on *01285 653184 or 01285 653122*

If you require **urgent** medical advice, call *111 (24 Hrs)*

In an **emergency** call **999**