

Otitis Externa/Swimmer's Ear

59 Holmes Road Moonee Ponds Vic 3039
Phone: 1300 357 338 / Fax: 1300 247 338
Email: reception@drdeborahamott.com.au
Visit: www.drdeborahamott.com.au



Dr Deborah Amott
Ear, Nose & Throat Surgeon

Otitis externa is a condition in which the skin lining the outer ear canal becomes red and swollen due to infection. It is more common in adults than children, and is also known as 'Swimmer's Ear', due to a common association with water exposure.

Symptoms:

- Pain, tenderness and itching of the ear canal. In severe cases the pain, swelling and redness may spread to the outer ear and surrounding skin.
- Discharge from the ear canal.
- Reduced hearing.

Causes:

- Water exposure: water entering the outer ear canal can contain bacteria, and may not drain freely. This allows overgrowth and infection to occur by bacteria or fungi.
- Local trauma: the use of cotton buds (or other 'ear scratchers' like bobby pins etc) in the ear causes microscopic tears in the skin, allowing the bacteria into the tissues to cause infection.
- Skin diseases: dermatitis, eczema or psoriasis all cause breaks in the skin of the ear canal, which can also promote infection.
- Excessive heat or humidity: warm, moist environments can result in more infections compared to cool, dry ones.
- Hearing aids can promote infection by preventing wax falling out and encouraging humidity. Bacteria can also coat their surface, forming a source for repeated infections.

Treatment:

The basis of successful treatment is to clean any pus and infected wax out of the ear canal and keep it empty and dry while it recovers.

- In mild cases your doctor will treat the infection by **cleaning the outer ear canal** and then prescribing antibiotic cream or drops. The treatment is used for about 5-10 days and contains chemicals that kill the bacteria or fungus causing the infection. If you use the drops on both sides, wipe the tip of the drop container with an alcohol wipe (available from your local chemist) and let the alcohol evaporate between each side, so you're not transferring infection from one ear to the other.
- If the infection is more severe, the doctor may insert a **cotton wick** into the ear canal. This helps to reduce the swelling and allows antibiotic drops to reach the infection deep in the canal. This is then removed after 1-2 weeks.
- Oral or even intravenous **antibiotics** are only rarely needed
- **Keep the ear meticulously dry** until the infection is cured – no swimming or putting your head underwater in the bath. When showering or washing your hair, use a piece of cotton wool covered on all surfaces with Vaseline inside the hollow of your outer ear (see picture – note that you should have Vaseline rather than just cotton wool) to stop water getting into the ear canal itself. Throw this away after each shower and use a new one each time. Do not use earplugs, as they are likely to prolong the infection.
- **DO NOT put anything into the ear canal** – cotton buds, pen lids, bobby pins, earplugs – NOTHING. Once the infection is cured, you are not allowed to put anything bigger



than your elbow in your ear, or the infection is more likely to come back in the future.

- **Hearing aids:** if you wear aids, try to keep them out of the ear as much as possible while your infection is being treated. Only put them in for the minimum time needed, if at all. When you take your aid out, clean the mould thoroughly with soapy water, and then wipe all the surfaces with contact your ear canal with an alcohol wipe (available from your chemist). Wipe the mould again with an alcohol wipe and let the alcohol evaporate before putting it into your ear.

Using eardrops: Lie on your side with the affected ear up, and place the drops in ear. Gently ‘pump’ the drops into the ear (by pushing on the skin in front of the ear canal 15-20 times), and continue to lie on your side for 1-2 minutes. This will ensure that the drops get into the deep parts of the infected canal.

Prevention:

In most cases, the infection will not return once the ear has been cleaned and appropriate treatment has been used. If you get recurrent infections:

- The ear usually cleans itself naturally, and having some wax in your ears creates an environment that reduces the chance of infection. You do not need to clean your ear canals, and should not do so.
- **DO NOT** poke objects such as hair pins and cotton buds in the ear to clean the canal – this will just allow any infection present to get worse, and might start a new infection.
- Avoid getting water in your ear. If water enters, shake it out and use a hairdryer set on low heat to dry the inside of the ear canal. Some people benefit from using Swimmer’s Ear Drops (available from the chemist, or use the recipe below) after swimming. Use occluding earplugs when swimming, showering and washing hair.
- If you have any underlying skin diseases like psoriasis or eczema, consider using some steroid drops (e.g. Elocon 1% lotion) in the canal each night to keep the skin healthy. Olive oil (2 drops each night each side) can often help in this respect. Stop these and see your doctor if you think you might have an infection.
- If you have any problems, contact your doctor for advice and treatment.

Swimmers’ Ear Drops Recipe:

- Mix 50ml isopropyl alcohol with 50ml white vinegar (acetic acid)
- Place one dropper full into ear, let sit, and drain daily after swimming or shower.

Itchy Ears

One of the most common causes of itchy ears is use of cotton buds – often, ironically, used to scratch the itch. The microscopic scratches caused by the cotton bud cause itchiness as they heal, and can also promote infection. The infection itself often causes itchiness as well.

Another cause can be inflammation of the skin of the ear canal (from chronic dermatitis, eczema or psoriasis). Interestingly some foods (e.g. greasy foods, sugar and starches) may aggravate the condition, thus you might want to try to avoid these.

A steroid eardrop (Elocon 1% lotion, 2 drops twice a day for two weeks, then as needed if the itch recurs) may be prescribed to reduce the itch at first.

- If there is an underlying dermatitis, it may be necessary to continue with these drops long term, at the lowest effective dose to avoid itching. Start with the above routine, then decrease to once daily for two weeks, then second daily for two weeks, then third daily, and so on
- Stay at the lowest dose that prevents any itching occurring.
- See your doctor if the itch is accompanied by discharge, pain or decrease in your hearing, all of which can be signs of superimposed infection.

Many people find putting a few drops of olive oil in the canal each night can also be very soothing. Heating the oil slightly (by rubbing the dropper between your hands, or in a warm cup of water) will make it less likely to cause dizziness.