

Is It Swimmer's Ear or an Ear Infection?

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Public places are starting to open up again—just in time for summer.

You and your family are probably looking forward to hanging out at the pool, beach, lake, or waterpark. With splish-splashing fun comes water-clogged ears and earaches. Sometimes the cure requires more than a towel dry.

Ear issues are painful and common, especially among children. “The key with these common health issues is to recognize the signs and take care of them before they become bigger problems,” says Leonardo Torres, M.D., a pediatric ear, nose, and throat specialist with the University of Miami Health System. “It’s helpful to know what to look for and when you should seek medical attention.”

Is this swimmer's ear?

Swimmer's ear (otitis externa) causes outer ear canal inflammation. When water remains in the ear canal, bacteria and fungus can grow and infect the skin. This is caused by germs that are commonly found in pools, waterparks, and lakes. Excessive ear cleaning can remove too much wax and predispose a child to swimmer's ear. Don't worry, swimmer's ear is not contagious.

These swimmer's ear symptoms usually develop a few days after swimming:

- pain when the infected ear is tugged or when pressure is placed on the ear
- persistent inner ear pain that can be intense

- inner-ear itching
- redness and swelling
- pus draining from the ear
- pain with chewing food

If you can wiggle the outer ear without pain, the condition is probably not swimmer's ear.

Try the following to avoid getting water trapped in your ear:



- If you are prone to water retention, consider using earplugs, a bathing cap, or swim molds when swimming and showering.
- Don't try to remove ear wax because it actually helps protect your ear canal.
- Use a towel to thoroughly dry your ears, especially after swimming or bathing.
- Tilt your head and gently pull your earlobe in different directions to help drain any water.
- If water remains in the ear, try using a hairdryer on the lowest and coolest setting to move air within the ear canal. Hold the dryer several inches away from the ear.
- Ask the manager of your public pool or waterpark how often the disinfectant

and pH levels are checked. This process should take place at least twice a day to help prevent the spread of germs.

- In your own pool, use test strips to check for proper chlorine or bromine levels.
- Ask your healthcare provider about using ear drops after swimming as a preventive measure.

Do I have an ear infection?

Earaches can be a sign of swimmer's ear or a middle/inner ear infection, but the causes are different. Getting water in your ears will not cause an acute middle/inner ear infection unless your eardrum has a hole in it.

An acute middle or inner ear infection (otitis media) is also common among children. These types of ear infections are caused by a fluid blockage in the tube that runs from the middle of your ears to the back of your throat. Normally, this tube drains the fluid made in the middle ear. If this tube gets blocked, fluid can build up behind the eardrum and lead to infection. These ear infections are not contagious.

A middle/inner ear infection may be the culprit if you or your child experience the following:

- fullness in the ear
- the feeling of general illness
- vomiting
- diarrhea
- loss of hearing

Causes of middle/inner ear infections include:

- allergies

- colds and sinus infections
- excess mucus and saliva produced during teething
- infected or overgrown adenoids (lymph tissue in the upper part of the throat)
- tobacco smoke

When should I see a doctor for my ear pain?

Check with your doctor if you or your child has any ear pain, pressure, or discomfort, notices draining from one or both ears or experiences any level of hearing loss. Prescription eardrops may be necessary to clear it up. Oral antibiotics are rarely needed to treat simple, uncomplicated cases of swimmer's ear. For children with ear tubes, damaged eardrums, an outer-ear infection, or ear drainage, eardrops must be carefully considered and doctor-recommended.

Don't insert objects like cotton swabs in the ear canal, and don't use an ear candle to "unclog" it.

Updated by Dana Kantrowitz, contributing writer.

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