

Swimmers Ear & Ear Infections

Ear infections are always on the rise in the summer. Additional recreational bodies in the pool, equals more bacteria. Get some over the counter swimmers ear medication, and use it daily whether you have swimmers ear or not. One product is Auro-dri. More information below:

If you could reduce yourself to the size of a flea and crawl into a swimmer's ear, you'd likely see an ear canal that's angry and red. It would look itchy, and you'd notice there's very little earwax. It would feel moist and smell clammy from bacteria burrowing and tunneling into the skin.

What you'd be seeing inside that swimmer's ear is a classic case of otitis externa, an infection better known—not surprisingly—as swimmer's ear. All it takes to come down with a stubborn bout of swimmer's ear is a set of ears and unrelenting moisture. "It's like keeping your hands in dishwater. The skin gets macerated and leathery," says Brian W. Hands, M.D., an ear, nose, and throat specialist in private practice in Toronto. "The ears are constantly bathed in water—swimming, showering, shampooing. Then people try to dry the ear with a cotton-tipped swab. That takes the top layer of skin off, along with protective bacteria. Then the bad bacteria win."

Swimmer's ear begins as an itchy ear. Left untreated, it can turn into a full-blown infection. The pain can be excruciating. Once infection sets in, you'll need a doctor's help and a round of antibiotics to squelch it. But there are plenty of things you can do to keep the pain from getting worse, and even more to stop it before it starts.

Blow-dry your ears. Eliminate the moisture in your ears, says Dr. Hands, every time you get them wet, whether or not you suspect an infection. Pull the flap of your ear up and out to straighten the ear canal and aim your hair dryer into your ear from 18 to 20 inches away. Use either a warm or cool setting, but let the dryer blow for 30 seconds. That will dry the ear, eliminating the moist conditions bacteria and fungi find most attractive for growth.

Try an over-the-counter remedy. Most drugstores carry eardrops that combat bacteria. If ear itchiness is still your only symptom, one of these preparations might snatch it back from the brink of infection, says Dan Drew, M.D., an avid swimmer and family physician in Jasper, Indiana. Use it each time your ears get wet.

Leave your earwax alone. Earwax serves several purposes, including harboring friendly bacteria, say Dr. Kamerer and Dr. House. Cooperate with your natural defenses by *not* swabbing the wax out. Wax coats the ear canal, protecting it from moisture.

Keep it dry. Since the irritation of swimmer's ear wears away earwax, you can manufacture your own version using petroleum jelly. Moisten a cotton ball with the jelly, says Dr. Hands, and tuck it gently, like a plug, just in the edge of your ear. It will absorb any moisture, keeping your ear warm and dry.

Take a drop. Several fluids are great for killing germs and drying your ears at the same time. If you're susceptible to swimmer's ear or if you spend a lot of time in the water, you should use a drying agent every time you get your head wet. Any of the following homemade solutions works well.

A squirt of rubbing alcohol. First, put your head down, with the affected ear up. Pull the ear upward and backward (to help straighten the canal) and squeeze a dropperful of alcohol into the ear canal. Wiggle your ear to get the alcohol to the bottom of the canal. Then tilt your head to the other side and let the alcohol drain out.

A kitchen solution. Eardrops of white vinegar or equal parts of alcohol and white vinegar will kill fungus and bacteria, says Dr. House. Use it the same way you would alcohol.

Mineral oil, baby oil, or lanolin. These can be preventive solutions before swimming. Apply as you would the alcohol.