

# Swimmer's Ear (Outer Ear Infection)

## What is swimmer's ear?

Swimmer's ear is an infection of the ear canal. It is also called otitis externa.

## What is the cause?

Bacteria and sometimes fungi may cause the infection. It can result from an injury, as might occur if you use a Q-tip or something sharp to clean your ear canal. It can also be caused by dirty water in your ears (for example, from a lake or ocean). Frequent showering or swimming can increase the risk of getting an infection. Outer ear infections often happen in the summer from swimming in polluted water. The chemicals in hair spray or hair dye may also irritate the ear canal and increase the risk of infection.

Some people get outer ear infections repeatedly, especially if they clean their ears too vigorously. People who have skin allergies also seem prone to these ear infections.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms include:

- Itching (often the first symptom)
- Pain and swelling in ear canal
- Discharge from the ear, which may smell bad
- Crusting around the ear canal opening

Sometimes swelling or pus may decrease your hearing.

## How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine your ears. Your provider may take a sample of pus and culture it to identify the bacteria or fungus.

## How is it treated?

Your healthcare provider will carefully clean and dry your ear. If your ear is very swollen, your provider may insert a wick soaked with an antibiotic into the ear to get the medicine into the infected area. You may need to put drops in your ear several times a day to keep the wick moist.

Your provider may prescribe an antibiotic if you have a severe infection.

Your provider may suggest a cream or ointment medicine for some types of infection.

The pain and swelling will go away gradually as the antibiotics or other medicines take effect. Most outer ear infections clear up completely in 5 to 7 days.

## **How can I take care of myself?**

Follow the full course of treatment prescribed by your healthcare provider. Ask your provider:

- How and when you will hear your test results
- How long it will take to recover
- What activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home, including how to take care of your ear and how to remove the wick
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Keep water out of your ears until the infection is completely gone. Take baths instead of showers. Ask your provider how you should protect your ears when you wash your hair.

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.

## **How can I help prevent swimmer's ear?**

- Don't put anything into your ear canal that should not be put there. This includes Q-tips. Q-tips are for cleaning the outer ear, not the ear canal.
- After your ear is healed, ask your healthcare provider if it might help to wear earplugs or use something such as lamb's wool to keep your ears dry when you swim and shower.
- Dry your ears carefully if you get water in them. You can use a hair dryer (on the "warm" setting) at least 6 inches from your ear to help dry the water in the ear canal.
- Avoid any substance that may cause an allergic reaction of the ear canal skin. Read product labels carefully and ask your healthcare provider before you use chemicals or medications in the area around your ear.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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# How to Use Ear Medicine



**Adults and children over 3**

1. Lie on your side with the ear that needs the medicine up.
2. For adults and children older than 3, hold the top part of the ear up and back as you put in the number of drops prescribed. For children 3 or younger, hold the earlobe down and back as you put in the number of drops prescribed. Do not touch the tip of the dropper to the ear or any other surface.
3. Keep lying down for a minute or two, or put a clean cotton plug in the ear to keep the medicine from running out when you get up.

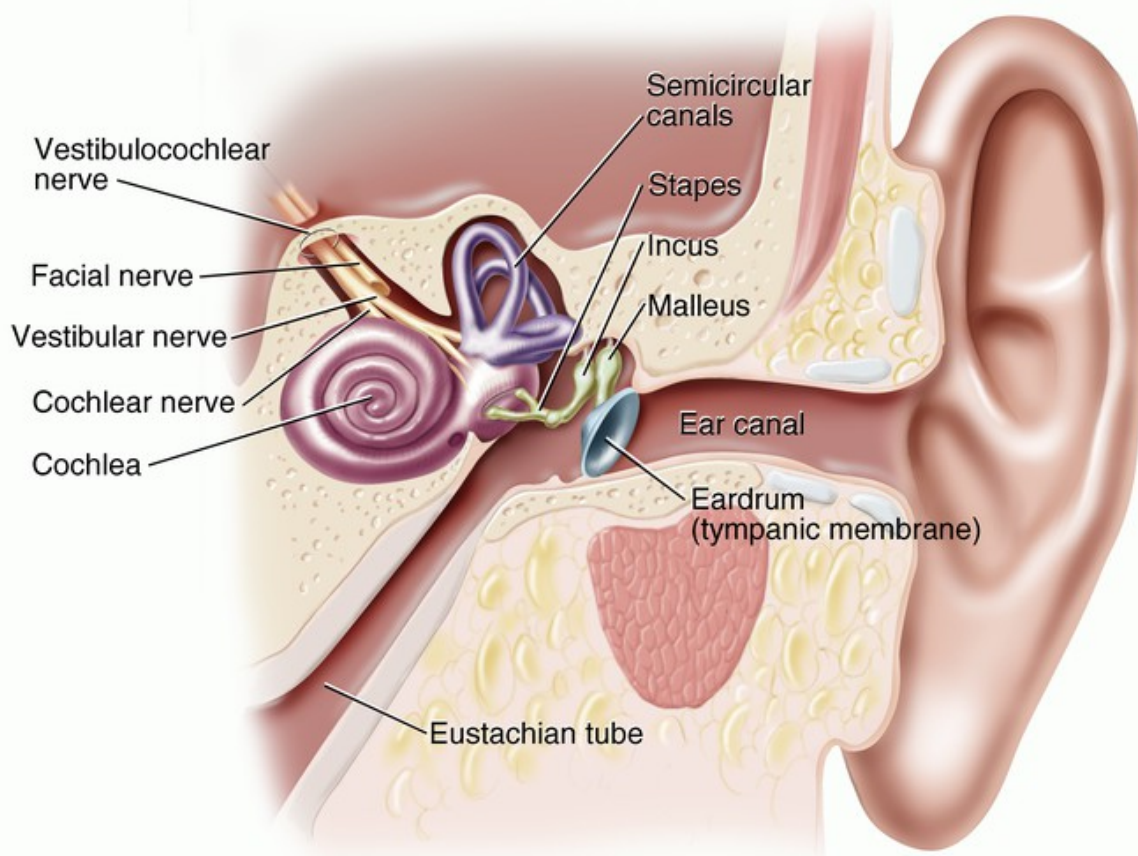
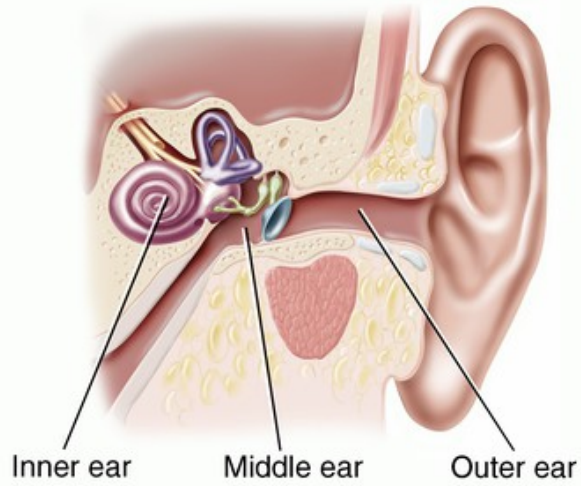
Ask your healthcare provider or pharmacist if you should wear gloves when you give ear medicine.

**Children 3 years old and younger**



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# Ear



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