



University of North Carolina Wilmington
Abrons Student Health Center

INSTRUCTION SHEET: OTITIS EXTERNA

The Student Health Provider has diagnosed otitis externa, also known as external ear infection, or swimmer's ear. Otitis externa is a bacterial/fungal infection in the ear canal (the ear canal goes from the outside opening of the ear to the eardrum).

Water in the ear, from swimming or bathing, makes the ear canal prone to infection. Hot and humid weather also predisposes to infection.

Symptoms of otitis externa include: ear pain, fullness or itching in the ear, ear drainage, and temporary loss of hearing. These symptoms are similar to those caused by otitis media (middle ear infection). To differentiate between external ear infection and middle ear infection, the provider looks in the ear with an instrument called an otoscope. It is important to distinguish between the two infections, as they are treated differently: External otitis is treated with drops in the ear canal, while middle ear infection is sometimes treated with an antibiotic by mouth.

MEASURES YOU SHOULD TAKE TO HELP TREAT EXTERNAL EAR INFECTION:

1. Use the ear drops regularly, as directed on the prescription.
2. The key to treatment is getting the drops down into the canal and keeping the medicine there. To accomplish this: Lie on your side, with the unaffected ear down. Put three to four drops in the infected ear canal, then *gently* pull the outer ear back and forth several times, working the medicine deeper into the ear canal. Remain still, good-ear-side-down for about 15 minutes.
3. Keep the ear as dry as possible. Swimming should be postponed until the infection has cleared. Try to avoid getting water in the ear when bathing. If water does get in the ear, the canal can be gently dried with a hair blow dryer. Use the *low* heat setting, and keep the blow dryer about six inches from the ear.
4. Over-the-counter pain medications can relieve discomfort associated with external otitis. Acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen, or naproxen can be taken, depending on individual preference.
5. Return to the Student Health Center in about one week. The provider can check to make sure the infection has cleared, continue the medicine if needed, okay a return to swimming, etc.
6. To prevent repeated episodes of otitis externa, try to keep the ear canal dry. Gentle swabbing with Q-tips (never deep into the canal), along with a hair blow dryer (low heat), can be used to dry the ear canal if it gets wet.
7. Should you develop severe pain, fever, severe headache, or stiff neck, see your personal/referral doctor or go to the closest emergency department *promptly*. Otitis externa does not normally cause these symptoms; another problem, requiring different treatment, could be present.