

Swimmer's ear means canal's too full of water

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I enjoy watching the Olympics. I tend to ignore the controversies and just try to appreciate the talent of the young men and women who are striving so passionately toward their goals.

As a physician and a mother, I also wonder about their health and hope that none of them get sick before their big event. Even a relatively minor illness such as swimmer's ear can cause a lot of discomfort for both Olympic athletes and regular kids.

Swimmer's ear, also known as otitis externa, is an infection of the ear canal. (This is not to be confused with an ordinary ear infection, otitis media, which involves the space behind the eardrum.)

Swimmer's ear commonly occurs when excess water becomes trapped in the ear canal after swimming. Any source of water can lead to swelling and inflammation, but "shower ear" just doesn't have that same ring to it.

Small ear canals and excessive earwax prevent optimal drainage, which can lead to infection.

Lakes generally have more bacterial growth than pools, especially during the hottest days of summer, making them a likely source of infection as well.

Swimmer's ear often starts out as an itchy, plugged-up feeling in the ear canal that progresses to soreness. Pulling or pressing on the earlobe can be extremely painful, and some children experience drainage from the ear.

The symptoms may not become bad enough for your child to mention until several hours or days after the water exposure.

Treatment of swimmer's ear is fairly straightforward. Your child's doctor will examine him to confirm the diagnosis and prescribe an antibiotic eardrop.

Use enough of the medicine to fill the ear canal, typically four to five drops per application. The drops go in a little more easily if you aim toward the side of the canal rather than squirting down the center of the opening.

Try to get your child to lie down with his ear up for a few minutes, if possible, or hold a cotton ball loosely against the ear to keep the drops from oozing out.

Your doctor may need to clean some of the drainage and debris from the ear canal to make room for the drops, and in some cases the ear is so swollen that he may have to place a wick in the ear to allow the drops to penetrate.

Oral antibiotics are typically not needed.

Keeping the ear dry is the key to preventing swimmer's ear. Encourage your child to shake out all the water from his ears after swimming. If he is prone to infection, you may want to invest in some over-the-counter drops designed to dry out the ears. You can even make a drying agent yourself at home using dilute white vinegar (acetic acid) and /or rubbing alcohol.

Home remedies based on vinegar can also be used to treat very mild cases of swimmer's ear, although if your child isn't feeling better within a few days you should check with your doctor to see if further treatment is needed. I don't recommend using plain rubbing alcohol on an acutely infected ear since it can sting like crazy.

Some doctors feel that earplugs help keep out water, while others find them less useful.

With proper prevention and treatment, swimmer's ear won't keep your child out of the water for long. Most of us are not Olympic caliber athletes, but swimming is still great exercise.

I need to keep practicing in case they ever develop the 100 meter dog paddle event!