

Patient information from BMJ

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Outer ear infection

An outer ear infection causes pain and trouble hearing. Outer ear infections are common among people who swim often. Mostly, they clear up in about 10 days with the right treatment.

What is an outer ear infection?

When you have an outer ear infection, the skin of your outer ear canal (the tube from your ear to your eardrum) is inflamed and swollen. Doctors call this **otitis externa**.

Most outer ear infections are caused by bacteria. Some are caused by a fungus.

Outer ear infection may happen when your ear canal gets wet (for example, from swimming) or damaged (for example, if you put a cotton bud inside your ear). It's more common if you have eczema or another skin problem in your ear.

Most people get a short-lasting (acute) infection. The symptoms come on quickly and usually get better quickly after treatment.

Both adults and children get outer ear infections.

What are the symptoms?

Pain is the main symptom of an outer ear infection. Your ear may also feel itchy and full, as if it's blocked. Sounds may be a bit muffled. The symptoms come on quickly, over a day or two.

To diagnose outer ear infection, your doctor will need to look into your ear.

What treatments work?

The best treatments for an outer ear infection are ear drops, which you squeeze into your ear. There are several different types. Your doctor may prescribe antibacterial ear drops, which kill the bacteria causing the infection.

There's good evidence that antibiotic ear drops work well to treat outer ear infection. If you try one type and it doesn't work, your doctor may prescribe another type. If your doctor can see that the infection is caused by a fungus, you may be given antifungal ear drops or tablets.

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If you have bits of skin and wax blocking your ear, the ear drops may not be able to get to the infection. Your doctor may carefully clean out your ear canal before you start using your ear drops.

You can take painkillers such as paracetamol or ibuprofen to ease the pain.

Your ear may heal faster if you keep the ear canal dry and avoid any further damage. Ask your doctor how long you should wait before you go swimming again. Try not to get your ears wet in the shower. Don't scratch your ear, even if it itches.

These are some things doctors advise to cut your chances of getting another infection.

- Use ear plugs when you swim.
- Tip your head to get rid of any water that gets into your ear.
- Avoid getting shampoo in your ears.
- Don't use cotton buds to clean your ears. You may damage the ear canal.

If you have a long-lasting skin disease (chronic dermatitis) which affects your ears, you need to get this treated. Some people need antibiotic tablets as well as ear drops.

Other treatments

If your infection lasts a long time, or if your ear is quite swollen, your doctor may clean out your ear canal and put a thin piece of gauze soaked in medicine into your ear canal. This will help the medicine get to the infection.

What will happen to me?

Most people who have treatment for an outer ear infection find the pain is much better after three days, and all the symptoms are gone after 10 days. If your pain has not gone after 10 days, go back to the doctor.

For some people, the infection becomes long-lasting (chronic). If you've got a chronic outer ear infection, you probably had an acute outer ear infection that has not completely gone away. Your ear remains inflamed for weeks or months. It doesn't hurt, but your ear may feel itchy or full. It may be hard to hear.

Some people get repeated outer ear infections. If you swim a lot and have had one ear infection, you're quite likely to get another one. Some people need regular follow-up checks with their doctor.

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