

Outer ear infection (otitis externa)

Department of Ear, Nose and Throat

Produced: Jun 2023

Review: June 2026

Information for Patients

Leaflet number: 1413 Version: 1

What is otitis externa?

It is the swelling of the skin around the outer ear canal, which is the tube between the outer ear and the eardrum. This is a common condition often seen by the GP. This condition normally settles down and rarely causes illness that lasts for a long time.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptom is earache. The pain can be bad enough to affect your sleep and eating.

Some other symptoms aside from earache are

- itchiness,
- fluid or pus leak from the ear,
- temporary hearing loss,
- and sometimes dizziness or ringing in the ear.

How do you get an outer ear infection?

These are some of the reasons why people get outer ear infection:

- Scratch or skin damage in the ear canal
- Skin conditions affecting the ear such as eczema, psoriasis and dermatitis.
- Getting your ears repeatedly wet as it increases the risk of getting an infection.

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What causes an outer ear infection?

In general, bacterial bugs cause this infection. You can also get this from other sources such as

- yeast infection,
- irritation or even allergic conditions.

How is it treated?

Your GP normally start you on pain killers and tells you to avoid scratching your ear.

Ear infection can settle down on its own even without treatment but this may take weeks.

Antibiotic ear drops are usually given to clear up the infection. Sometimes antibiotics to be taken by mouth may also be prescribed if the infection is more serious.

An ear swab may also be taken to check which type of bugs are causing the infection.

If the infection is more serious you may need to be seen by an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) doctor.

- The ENT doctor can clear up the discharges from your ear by suctioning.
- Sometimes they can insert a small sponge called 'pope wick' inside the ear. This holds the ear drops. This makes the treatment work better. The pope wick will need to be taken out in about 3 days, which means you need to come back to the clinic for a follow-up.

How do you stop this from happening?

Do not put objects such as cotton buds inside your ear and scratch the insides with your fingers . These cause the skin lining in the ear to break. This, makes it more likely to get an infection.

An ear plug may help to keep the water from getting in if you are a regular swimmer. Keep your ears dry after a shower or bath. Also make sure soaps or shampoos are not left inside the ear.

Are there any complications?

Outer ear infection normally settles down on its own with or without treatment. Sometimes your doctor might ask you to stay in the hospital for antibiotics through the vein if it is bad. Sometimes you may need surgery to help ease the problem.

A condition called necrotising otitis externa happens although this is not common. This is when the infection spreads from the skin to the underlying bone. This condition is dangerous and needs quick treatment with antibiotics.

More information

For more details, please go to <https://www.entuk.org/>

Contact details:

Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) Department, Leicester Royal Infirmary switchboard: 0300 303 1573.

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Previous reference:

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