



Swimmer's ear

Painfully common malady of summer

WRITTEN BY JAN WILSON

Summertime means splashing around at the pool, beach and water park. And while there's nothing better than cooling down in the water on a hot day, summer is also peak time for the uncomfortable infection known as swimmer's ear.

Swimmer's ear, or otitis externa, happens when bacteria grow in the ear canal, often due to moisture, Dr. Douglas Leventhal of ENT and Allergy Associates of Oradell says.

"There will be pain and itching in the outer ear," he says, "as well as a sensation that the ear is blocked and hearing is muffled. Sometimes fluid will come out. Typically patients will get pain and discomfort in front of and outside the ear."

Parents will know whether their kids have the condition because it is often too uncomfortable to ignore.

"It won't be a secret for very long," says Dr. David Schaumberger, a pediatrician at Tenafly Pediatrics and an attending physician at Englewood Hospital and Medical Center. "This is typically a painful condition. That's why we recommend that patients use

a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (such as ibuprofen) for pain relief." He adds that most of the patients with the condition tend to be between 5 and 15 years old. "It's pretty uncommon under the age of 4."

Treatment

Doctors can easily treat swimmer's ear through the use of antibiotics or steroid ear drops, which deliver medication right to the site of the problem. In more severe cases, a wick, or a small sponge, will be used to help the medication get past the swelling. Your child should feel better soon, Schaumberger says, because medications used today are better than in the past.

"The type of antibiotic we use now is very effective," he says, "and pain relief happens very quickly."

Dr. Lawrence Rosen, co-author of *Treatment Alternatives for Children* and the founder of the Whole Child Center, a pediatric practice in Oradell that practices integrative medicine, says there are alternatives to antibiotics that parents can employ.

"You can use any of these: apple

cider vinegar, garlic mullein oil or hydrogen peroxide," Rosen says. "Three drops, three times per day until the pain is resolved. Swimmer's ear is very likely to go away with brief natural treatment like this."

If the pain is severe and fever is present, the patient does need to be checked by a doctor. It's also important to keep water out of the ears until the child is feeling better – and some doctors suggest it is best to stay out of the water until treatment is largely over, which shouldn't be more than 10 days. ❖

Prevention?

While parents might use drops, blow dryers or earplugs in an attempt to keep ears clear, doctors say it's not necessary unless your child gets repeated infections. "If your child is getting a swimmer's ear once a season," Schaumberger says, "it's really a lot of work for not very much return."

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