



As soon as the warm weather hits, many children believe the perfect way to spend a hot summer's day is to dive into a cool lake or pool, but, just like everything else, there is something to be aware of that may put a damper on your children's summer fun—swimmer's ear.

What is it? Swimmer's ear, officially known as otitis externa, is an infection of the outer ear canal that is common in children and adolescents during the warmer months when they spend a lot of time in water.

What causes it? Too much water in an ear canal can cause skin irritations, which allow for the penetration of bacteria or fungi. Polluted water is much more likely to cause swimmer's ear than pools with good chlorine and pH levels. However, despite its nickname, children can get swimmer's ear without swimming. Anything that aggravates the skin in the ear canal can cause infection, including ear scratching, vigorous ear cleaning with cotton swabs, the insertion of foreign objects or a middle ear infection that drains pus into the ear canal through a hole in the eardrum.

How can you prevent it? After your child's ears get wet, use over-the-counter drops of dilute solution acetic drops or alcohol in the ears. These are common at local pharmacies and should not be used for children with ear tubes or holes in their eardrums. Gently towel-drying the ears after being wet is helpful, and letting the ears drain out excess water by tilting the child's head to the side after swimming or bathing is a good practice.

What are common symptoms? Pain is the primary symptom, especially when the ear lobe is pulled or pressed. Chewing may also cause soreness, and the ear canal may itch

SWIMMER'S DREAR, I MEAN EAR

before it begins to hurt. Once the ear is infected, it may feel "full." The outer ear may swell and become red, and the lymph nodes around the area may enlarge and become tender. The ear may produce cloudy, yellowish, pus-like discharge. These symptoms may make hearing difficult, but fever is not normally associated with this infection, and it is not contagious.

What should you do if you think your child has swimmer's ear? You may help comfort your child by placing a warm towel or heating pad over his or her ear,

but it is important to consult your child's doctor so the infection does not spread. During treatment, make sure to keep water out of your child's ear. Shower caps are helpful while bathing, and your doctor may suggest earplugs.

How is it treated? Mild cases are generally cured with antibiotic drops that fight the infection, a steroid to reduce the swelling and over-the-counter medications, such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen, for the pain. After treatment has begun, the child should begin to feel better in two days. If the infection is more severe, drops may not be effective because of swelling. If this is the case, a cotton swab may be inserted into the ear to help administer the drops, and the debris and pus may need to be removed with gentle suction. Extreme cases may be treated with oral antibiotics.

References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov/healthyswimming/swimmers_ear.htm, June 14, 2006.

KidsHealth®, http://kidshealth.org/parent/infections/ear/swimmer_ear.html, June 14, 2006.

For more information, ask your pharmacist!

This information provided by the Michigan Pharmacists Association and:

