

## Otitis Externa



Infections are characterized by inflammation, swelling, redness and warmth due to increased blood flow, weepiness of the tissue and formation of pus. Infections can be of the outer ear, middle ear or inner ear

Otitis externa is ear canal infection.

In most cases it is in healthy people who clean their ears with cotton buds and so wipe off the protective waterproofing and infection-fighting layer of wax. These infections are started because the delicate skin of the canal is unable to keep bacteria from penetrating it because this canal skin is grazed by repeated cleaning trauma and boggy from water exposure. The responsible microorganism in 90 percent of cases is pseudomonas, a moisture loving bacterium.

In people who have lots of warm humid water exposure or sweaty canals due to occlusive plugs or aids, fungal overgrowth can cause infection of the canal skin. Usually it is the aspergillus niger fungus which fills the canal with debris that looks like black and white blobs, like moist newspaper print. Rarely, other fungi like yeasts can be the cause.

Rarely, ear canal infections are deeply invasive and penetrate bone and travel deep into the skull. People at greater risk of these are older diabetics and immunosuppressed individuals.

Pain is the main presenting early symptom and is closely followed by blocked feeling as the ear canal swells and closes over. A discharge often occurs which can be onto the pillow. The surrounding tissues can swell up and the skin around the opening can crust with dried secretions. Usually the ear is tender to pull on.

Treatment consists of swabbing the ear and suctioning it out completely, and use of appropriate topical medication. A sponge wick may need to be placed in the ear in order to get the medication in initially. On occasion, systemic medication is required.

Tips to prevent ear canal infections or their early recurrence include not cleaning the canals or scratching itchy canal, having your ears cleaned periodically by an otolaryngologist who can prescribe ointments and lotions if your ears are flaky or scaly or have extensive earwax. Don't use cotton buds, they push small amounts of wax deep into the canal where it doesn't belong. Finally, the ear canal must be kept dry at all times for at least a month. A good way of achieving this is to smear a rolled up ball of Blu-Tak over the **outer** opening of the ear canal (not a sausage going into the canal which could break off) and then holding a cup over the ear whilst washing your hair. Remember, cotton buds must be discontinued!