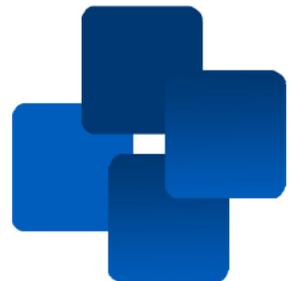


Patient Information

Otitis externa: causes and treatment

Ears, Nose and Throat Department



What is otitis externa?

It is inflammation and infection of the ear canal, usually caused by skin allergies, water contact, eczema, or scratches and abrasions. Symptoms include itching, pain, discharge and temporary dulled hearing.

What is the treatment for otitis externa?

Ear drops or sprays clear most cases of otitis externa. They usually contain an antibiotic to clear the infection, and a steroid to reduce the inflammation and itching. When you use ear drops, we advise that you:

- Put the drops in the ear as prescribed or advised by your doctor and lie in the required position for 1-2 minutes.
- Press the cartilage at the front of the ear canal a few times to push the drops deep inside the ear canal.
- It may take a week or so for symptoms to go completely. Several brands of drops are available; if one does not work well then your doctor will advise you to change to another.

Written instructions on how to insert ear drops are available in the ENT outpatients clinic or ask a nurse to advise you on this if you are unsure.

Sometimes, antibiotic tablets or medicines are needed in addition to drops, if the infection is severe.

If the above does not work, further treatment may be needed:

- A doctor or nurse may clean the ear canal. Sometimes, gentle suction or mopping is used. This removes the discharge lying in the ear canal.
- Sometimes, a doctor or nurse will place a yellow gauze dressing or a sponge dressing that is soaked in ear drops into the ear canal. This gets the drops right to the end of the ear canal, particularly if it is very swollen.
- A doctor may take a swab of the discharge to find out which bacterium is causing the infection and which specific antibiotic to use.

It is important that you follow this advice:

- Prevent water from entering the ear canal during your treatment. You can do this when showering by placing a piece of cotton wool coated in Vaseline in the outer ear.
- Continue using ear drops as directed by your doctor - it is important you wash your hands before and after putting the drops in your ear.
- It is important to complete antibiotic treatment as directed by your doctor.
- It is important that you avoid cleaning the ear canal with cotton buds as they can further damage the skin and make things worse. Just clean the outside of the ear with a cloth when any discharge appears.

If you are sent home with an ear dressing still in place, do not try to remove it yourself; the pack should stay in the ear until your next appointment. If some becomes dislodged, push it back in with a clean finger. You may also:

- Place a small piece of cotton wool inside your ear canal **on top** of the ear pack which can be changed when soiled, but take care not to disturb the internal packing.
- Use painkillers like paracetamol or ibuprofen to help if pain develops.

Things to look out for:

- An increased, smelly discharge from your ear.
- If your outer ear becomes very red, inflamed and tender or painful.
- If you develop a temperature (fever) - feeling unwell and feverish.
- Your infection lasting more than 3-4 weeks.
- Developing facial weakness on the affected side, photosensitivity, severe headaches, vomiting and/or dizziness.

If you experience any of the above, you need to seek advice from the ENT Department (during office hours), the ward (out of hours) or go to the Emergency Department - There is a chance that the infection has started spreading into the surrounding bone which normally requires admission, blood tests, long term IV antibiotics and radiological investigations.

How can I prevent further bouts of otitis externa?

If you are prone to otitis externa, to help prevent recurrences, we advise that you keep the ears dry and leave them alone. This means:

- Try not to let soap or shampoo get into your ear canal. Use a piece of cotton wool coated in Vaseline in the outer ear while showering.
- Use non-silicone earplugs while swimming to help keep ears dry.
- Do not use corners of towels or cotton buds to dry any water that does get in the ear canal. Let your ears dry naturally.
- Do not clean the ear canal with cotton buds. They may scratch and irritate, and push wax or dirt further into the ear. The ear cleans itself, and bits of wax will fall out naturally now and then.
- Do not leave balls of cotton wool in the ear canal. This stops the discharge (debris) which needs to come out. However, if the discharge is continuous, then some cotton wool placed loosely in the outer part of the canal may be needed to mop it up. If you use cotton wool, replace it when it becomes soiled.
- You must try not to scratch or poke the ear canal with fingers, cotton buds, cotton wool, towels, etc.

Useful Telephone Numbers

- Switchboard, Lister Hospital
☎ 01438 314333 - ask for ENT Department
- ENT Nurse Specialist (Monday to Friday, 9am - 5pm)
☎ Mobile: 0778 534 3359 or 0787 639 0290

In an emergency, dial 999 and request an ambulance or attend your nearest Emergency Department.

NHS 111 can help if you have an urgent medical problem and you're not sure what to do. It is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

☎ 111

Useful websites:

www.entuk.org

www.nhs.uk