External Ear Infections

This type of infection is caused by bacteria or fungus of the outer ear canal. They happen most often in older children and adults. Using cotton swabs to remove earwax (cerumen, pronounced “sir-Roo-men”) often leads to infection. About half of external ear infections are called “swimmer’s ear” because it happens when the ear has become wet from swimming and showering.

Fungal ear infections
Two types of fungus cause fungus infections of the ear canal. One is the fungus that causes yeast infections of the vagina and the mouth (Candida Albicans) and the other is similar to bread mold (Aspergillosis Nigra).

Symptoms of fungal yeast infection include:
• Itching followed by pain
• Feeling of fullness in the ear
• Pain may spread to the jaw and neck.

Bacterial ear infection
Bacterial ear infections are usually caused by one of two common types of bacteria found on everyone’s skin.

Symptoms of bacterial ear infection include:
• Pain begins suddenly, and is more severe than a yeast infection.
• Swelling of the ear canal, jaw, neck and scalp.
• Rapid increase of symptoms

How are these infections treated?
1. Prescription eardrops that combine several medications:
   • Antibiotics to control infection
   • Acidic compound to help prevent bacteria and fungus from growing
   • Steroids to decrease swelling of the ear canal.
2. Oral antibiotics are also used.

The doctor may place a special wick in a swollen ear canal to help the medicine get deeper into the ear canal and keep it in contact with the infected area. Sometimes the doctor needs to clear the fungus and bacterial matter from the ear canal.

Can these infections be prevented?
Yes, leave earwax alone! It’s too bad that earwax or cerumen is brown, because the color makes people think it is dirt. It’s not! This actually protects the ear canal and eardrum. Cerumen is formed halfway in the ear canal. It then flows ever so slowly outward until it appears as a brown or tan ring at the ear canal opening. At this point, it dries and flakes off.

Why do we have earwax or cerumen and what does it do?
• Keeps the skin of the ear canal soft and healthy.
• It sweeps the canal of dirt and foreign materials.
• It traps dust and dirt.
• It protects the ear canal by killing bacteria and fungus (it has natural chemicals and acid in it).

Is it necessary to clean away the cerumen?
Cerumen will not cause total blockage of the ear canal if it is left alone. Removing the cerumen can cause more problems, such as:
• Direct injury to the eardrum
• Blockage from forcing cerumen against eardrum
• Trauma to the skin can allow infection
• Having the skin in the ear canal unprotected, which leaves you more prone to eczema, itching and infection.

Avoid using cotton swabs or other objects in your ears. It serves an important purpose in your ears!

When should I see a doctor?
External ear infections are easier to treat early on. Waiting to treat an infection can allow it to spread.
• For sudden blockages.
• Loss of hearing with an earache.
• If you have impaired immune function, an infection can become a severe problem. Be sure to seek early treatment.

TSC-338 (Rev 10/07) The information presented is intended for general information and educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care provider. Contact your health care provider if you believe you have a health care problem.